

A STUDY ON RETENTION: POSITIVE STEPS FOR A SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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**Title**

A Study on Retention: Positive Steps for a Small Liberal Arts College

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**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Retention is a concern for colleges and universities nationwide. The focus of this study is what a small private liberal arts college does well in terms of retaining students by examining the students who left the college for a minimum of one semester and then returned to finish their degree. A survey instrument was used to examine the positive impact the faculty, academic advising, academic program, student services, technology, and the living environment had on the return of reactivated students to Jamestown College (JC). The survey instrument was also used to find out the reasons students attended JC initially, why they left, why they came back, what they like the most, and what they like the least about JC. The faculty and staff of JC had the most positive impact on reactivated students returning to JC. Other factors that positively impacted the students included academic advising and programs of study.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Jamestown College (JC) is a small private liberal arts college in central North Dakota. It is a traditional residential school with no branch campuses or online programs. Retention is a concern of the college's administration. The focus of this study is what JC does well in terms of retaining students by examining the students who leave JC for a minimum of one semester and then return to finish their degree.

“Student retention is one of the leading challenges faced by colleges and universities today. To those within an institution, retention is viewed as a critical component of an institution's success” (Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 361). Retention has become an issue that is widely examined across institutions of higher learning in the United States. Lau (2003) stated that poor retention causes lower graduation rates and greater financial loss to the institution. Poor retention also negatively affects the way an institution is viewed by stakeholders, legislators, parents, and new students, which impacts the institutions reputation and recruiting efforts.

Many factors contribute to whether a student remains at an institution or whether that student transfers to a different one. Reason (2003) stated that college grade point average (GPA) was the best overall predictor of first-year retention. Students with higher GPA's typically had a greater tendency to remain in school. Another piece of the prediction puzzle stems from factors prior to a student entering an institution of higher education such as high school GPA, standardized test scores, and the education level achieved by the student's parents.

Students transfer to different institutions for a variety of reasons, which are divided into external and internal reasons. Lundquist, Spalding, and Landrum (2002-2003) stated that two major reasons students transfer institutions is for personal reasons and due to financial problems. These reasons are considered external circumstances because the reason for the transfer has

nothing directly to do with the institution. Changing career paths or education goals, the geographic location of the campus, and the weather are also external circumstances which may cause a student to transfer institutions (Lau, 2003).

Internal circumstances are also reasons students transfer institutions. Lau (2003) stated that one internal circumstance that can contribute to student attrition is enrolling students who are not academically prepared for the rigors of college life. Professor competency and the strength of academic programs are two more internal circumstances that can cause students to leave an institution of higher education. Student motivation is an internal circumstance that is influenced by setting goals and understanding expectations which can be facilitated with the help of an academic advisor. The final internal circumstance is faculty and staff attitudes that are negative which can have a significant impact on retention. “Conversely, instructors can and do make a tremendous positive impact on student success and retention when they show interest in their students, provide stimulating classroom experiences, and relate course content to the ‘real world’”(Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 374).

All of these factors still leave us with the question, what can an institution of higher learning do to combat the attrition problem? There are many programs and strategies that can be implemented in an attempt to positively impact the retention rates of students. Reason (2003) stated that one of the strategies is integrating students into the academic life of the institution. When a student is committed to an academic program, it can lead the student to have a greater desire to stay at an institution, which may consequently increase retention.

Physical facilities can affect retention rates at an institution. Student housing should be designed to meet the needs of students. Study rooms enhance campuses. A comfortable environment with modern facilities will help students feel at home at their college or university.

Modern facilities should include state-of-the-art technology, which can be extremely important to students. Outdated technology does little to enhance learning. It can cause frustration and could impact whether or not a student stays at an institution or decides to leave (Lau, 2003).

“Multimedia technology provides effective attention-gathering tools and can be used to enrich and complement classroom teaching and learning, and may even reinvent subject matter” (Lau, 2003, p. 123).

Lau (2003) stated that faculty members must incorporate different types of instructional methodologies in the classroom to positively impact retention. Students need to be challenged in a variety of ways. Students need more than a basic understanding of their discipline. They need to develop practical skills that prepare them for their future careers. They can gain this from cooperative and collaborative learning where students use each other as resources rather than depending only on their individual knowledge. Faculty members can also work with students one-on-one and make sure they are accessible outside of the classroom and be approachable and personable. “Such behaviors send subtle, but important, symbolic messages that the faculty member and the institution value students” (Lau, 2003, p. 6).

There are certain things academic advisors should do to help retain students. Minimally, advisors should meet with their advisees once per semester and meet every month with students who are at risk academically (Frost, 1999). Lau (2003) stated that student motivation can come from having clear, explicit learning goals designed with the help of an academic advisor. Effective academic advisors explain to their advisees what is expected from them in order for them to succeed. This is very important, especially for first year students.

Student services is an area that can positively or negatively impact the culture of an institution of higher education. In many post-secondary schools student services include the

Business, Financial Aid, Registrar, and Student Life Offices. Each of these offices serves students on a regular basis and can provide a positive experience for students who visit them.

A student's financial situation is typically considered an external circumstance. It can also be considered an internal circumstance when students are not aware of all financial options. When students are out of funds and ready to leave the institution "better information dissemination regarding loans, college employment, and financial aid opportunities, something clearly within the college's control, may aid in retention" (Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 374). In a national survey conducted with private colleges and universities, chief executive officers rated the amount of financial aid available as the second most important factor in student attrition (Habley, Valiga, McClanahan, & Burkum, 2010).

The registrar's office personnel works with students on a regular basis regarding academic issues of all kinds. The unique position of the staff in the registrar's office enables them to be useful in developing and implementing academic policy within the institution. In addition, the personnel can be advocates for students, provide information to students, and promote and facilitate student success (Blaney, 2009).

The student life personnel have direct control over student activities on campus and residence life. A greater variety of activities will help students with different interests become involved in the campus community and hopefully will help them feel like they are a part of the college or university. Habley et al. (2010) proposed that 89% of private school chief executive officers felt college sponsored social activities were major contributors to retention. Eighty-three percent of chief executive officers also believed residence hall programs contributed in a major way to the retention of students.

Retention is an issue faced by every college and university in the nation. There are many signs and indicators that will help schools identify and recruit students that are likely to succeed and prosper at an institution of higher learning. The responsibility for retention is something that not only lies in the hands of the students but is also dependent on higher education staff. “As such, every individual employed by a college has the responsibility and the opportunity to positively impact the environment, and subsequently the success of the students it serves” (Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 374).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons students returned to Jamestown College (JC) after they withdrew from JC and were not enrolled at JC for a minimum of one semester.

### **Research Questions**

This study was designed to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the main factors that affect a student’s decision to return to Jamestown College after a withdrawal of at least one semester?
2. How would they rate the overall quality of these factors?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study will be useful to JC administration in that it will provide valuable information in the area of student retention. This study will help JC identify key reasons students come back to JC and how those reasons compare to the reasons they came to JC initially. The study will also outline areas of focus to aid in recruiting efforts.

## **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions will assist in understanding unfamiliar terms in this document. All of the definitions are not accompanied by citation as they were developed by the researcher.

*ACT*– American College Test - A standardized achievement examination for college admission in the United States.

*Attrition* – A reduction in number of students due to students transferring out or withdrawing.

*External Circumstances* - Issues outside of the college’s control.

*GPA* – Grade Point Average.

*Internal Circumstances* - Issues that can be influenced by the college

*JC* - Jamestown College.

*Matriculate* – To enroll as a member of a college or university.

*React* – A student who returns to a college or university after having been absent for 1 or more semesters from that college or university.

*Retention* – Maintaining the enrollment of a student from one semester to the next.

*SAT* – Scholastic Aptitude Test – A standardized achievement examination for college admission in the United States.

*Stopout* – Leaving a college or university for a minimum of 1 semester and then returning to either that college or university or enrolling in a different college or university.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations might include the following:

1. This study was conducted at a small liberal arts college in rural North Dakota.
2. Most of the students that attend JC are from middle class Caucasian families.

## **Delimitations of the Study**

Delimitations might include the following:

1. This study focused on students who left JC for a semester or more and then returned.
2. The sample size was small relative to the number of students attending JC.

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 presented the introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms, limitations, delimitations, and organization of the study. Chapter 2 will contain the review of related literature and research related to retention at a small rural liberal arts college. The methodology and procedures used to gather data for the study will be presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will contain the findings that emerged from the study. A summary of the study, discussion of analysis, conclusions reached, and recommendations will be contained in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF SELECTED/RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH**

Chapter 2 is an extensive review of literature and research related to retention at four year colleges or universities. The chapter will be divided into sections that will include (a) the problems caused by attrition, (b) predictors of retention, (c) reasons students transfer institutions, (d) strategies to combat attrition (e) the college personnel responsible for retention at the institution and (f) characteristics of students who stopout.

### **The Problems Caused by Attrition**

Retention is an issue that is widely examined across institutions of higher learning. “Student retention is one of the leading challenges faced by colleges and universities today. To those within an institution, retention is viewed as a critical component of an institution’s success” (Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 361). The reason it has become a concern is because of the effects of attrition on an institution. Lower graduation rates and greater financial loss are a direct result of low retention (Lau, 2003). Each student that leaves before degree completion can cost an institution thousands of dollars in tuition, fees, and alumni contributions (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). Another result of poor retention is the way an institution is viewed by stakeholders and potential new students, which impacts the institution’s reputation and recruiting efforts.

“Student retention is a vital factor in the survival of academic institutions and is equally applicable to all colleges and universities” (Frost, 1999, p. 203).

Two of the stakeholders that would like to see an increase in college retention rates are the state and federal governments. According to Demski (2011) between 2003 and 2008 the state and federal governments spent \$9.1 billion on appropriations and grants for students who dropped out after their freshman year. The burden on the government and ultimately the taxpayers is



increasing as students stop out and take longer to complete their schooling or dropout completely (Jepsen, Patel, & Troske, 2010).

Statistics in 2009 from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis website stated that nationwide 24% of freshmen did not return to their same college or university for their sophomore year. This in turn affects the four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation rates at that institution. According to the NCHEMS, the 2009 six-year graduation rate nation-wide was 55.5%. The fact that only about one-half of students graduate within six years is widely perceived as a failure (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2005). Institutions that increase student retention between the freshman and sophomore year will exponentially increase their graduation rate (Reason, 2003). Statistics from 1990 – 2005 at Jamestown College (JC) showed an average of 28% of the freshmen cohort did not return for their sophomore year. Fourteen percent of the freshmen cohort did not return for their junior year and another 10% did not return for their senior year. That makes a total average of 52% of freshmen that began at JC from 1990-2005 did not graduate from JC. Each year students remain at an institution the more likely they are going to graduate. It is important for institutions of higher education to have the highest graduation rate possible since the graduation rate is viewed by stakeholders as a measure of a college's or university's quality (Kelly & Schneider, 2011).

Not only does attrition hurt an institution but it can also impact the students. "Student attrition represents a significant financial loss for the school and a potential loss of productivity for the individual" (Lundquist, Spalding, & Landrum, 2002-2003, p. 123). Students that dropout are often left in a position to earn much less over a lifetime of work (DeBerard et al. 2004). They lose the tuition money, the earnings from the time spent pursuing a degree, and gain student loan debt

for a degree they do not possess (Adams, 2011). The students who persist and earn a bachelor's degree earn almost twice as much as high school graduates (Wilson, 2006). Even the students with some postsecondary attendance have higher earnings than those without any postsecondary education but still have lower earnings than the students who complete a degree (Jepsen et al. 2010).

Lundquist et al. (2002-2003) stated that by transferring schools students can lose credits because of transfer credit rules. This could possibly extend their time in college by one semester or even an entire year depending on the number of lost credits and the program of study they pursue at the new institution. Not only can it cost an extra year of schooling but by extending their time in college it costs them one extra year in the workforce. The students are paying an extra year of tuition, room and board costs, and fees and are losing a year of wages.

### **Predictors of Retention**

There are many different predictors that can be used to help institutions identify students at risk of becoming an attrition statistic. Reason (2003) stated that college grade point average (GPA) was the best overall predictor of first-year retention. It was found that the probability of students returning for a second year of college dramatically increased with GPAs that were higher. Students with lower GPAs had a greater tendency to withdraw from school. Students who increased their college GPA from 3.0 to 4.0 also increased the probability of reenrollment by seven percentage points which as theory states will increase retention (Porter, 2000). Other factors that can positively impact first to second year retention include living on campus, using campus recreational facilities, taking a greater credit load, and doing as well as one's classmates (Herzog, 2003).

Another factor that affects attrition is gender. Jorgensen, Ferraro, Fichten, and Havel (2009) stated that the attrition rate of male students was higher than that of female students. This was due to less time studying outside of class, lower levels of motivation, and feeling less connected to the institution. In 2001, women earned the majority of bachelor's degree in every state (Cook, 2009).

Parental educational background has an impact on the likelihood of students completing their postsecondary education. Cook (2009) stated that first generation college students were at a higher risk to drop out and not complete college due to less support from family members, less rigorous college preparation courses in high school, and lower self confidence in being able to complete a college education. Beasley (2011) found that the education level attained by parents had a strong impact on a student's decision to attend college. Parents with less education were less supportive of college attendance and more supportive of jobs, trade schools, and the military. First generation students are also more likely to stop out than students whose parents have a college education (Porter, 2000).

Family income strongly influences a student's decisions to attend college and the success the student had (Beasley, 2011). Students that decide to attend and are from lower income families, defined as a family that has a yearly income of \$25,000 or less, are less likely to persist in college (Johnson, 2005). Students that have a higher socioeconomic status, higher GPA, live on campus, and apply early are more likely to reenroll after one year (Porter, 2000).

Nontraditional student status is also a factor in attrition. Students that are more than 25 years old are considered nontraditional. These students are less likely to persist than younger students (Dodgson & Bolam, 2002). Other nontraditional factors include students who attend

part-time, are employed full-time, are married, or are financially independent. Having one or more of these characteristics puts the student at a higher risk of non-completion (Cook, 2009).

Johnson (2005) stated that delayed enrollment increases the risk of departure from an institution. Students who enter a college or university a year or less after graduation from high school were less likely to drop out. Students who enroll immediately after high school are less likely to drop out compared to the students whose first enrollment happened in a non-fall term or delay entry (Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2004).

The final piece to the prediction puzzle is students who are more likely to succeed based on their scores prior to entering an institution of higher education. “Variables that indicate the level of achievement in high school—high school grade point average (HS GPA) and college admissions test scores (SAT/ACT)—appeared to consistently be significant predictors of retention” (Reason, 2003, p. 178). Students that enter college with a 4.0 GPA were seven times more likely to graduate from college than students entering college with a 2.0 GPA from high school (Reason, 2003). Statistics hold true for standardized test scores as well. Students with the highest SAT scores in their class were six times more likely to graduate from college than students with lowest SAT scores (Reason, 2003). Studies show that high school achievement is the best predictor of success in college (Snyder, Hackett, Stewart, & Smith, 2002).

## **Reasons Students Transfer Institutions**

### **External circumstances**

Students transfer to different institutions for a variety of reasons that are out of an institution's control. Research shows that two major reasons students transfer institutions are for personal reasons and financial problems (Lundquist et al., 2002-2003). Personal reasons could be anything from getting married to the death of a family member. Landrum (2001-2002) stated that

students transfer institutions to move closer to home. Personal reasons, financial problems, and being closer to home are all external circumstances that often relate to family and cannot be controlled by a college or university.

Lau (2003) stated that changing career paths or educational goals are viable reasons students transfer institutions. Many students have certain career or educational ideas when they leave high school and then change their ideas when they gain an understanding of the field they chose. This could possibly cause them to change institutions to find an institution that better fits their educational goals. The student has no choice but to transfer schools to find one with the desired major.

Finances can also be a reason students leave a college or university. The average American household income will decrease in the future (Reason, 2003). Along with decreased financial support of higher education by the public, the decrease in household income may lead to a decrease in the ability for students or their families to afford college. The pattern of stopout from higher education is often a result of student's financial problems resulting in the student trying to alternate work and college attendance (Barefoot, 2010). Students who enter college with the assistance of financial aid are likely to remain in school longer (Wilson, 2006).

The geographic location of a campus may impact the decision of college students to stay or transfer to another school. Educational institutions cannot change their physical location making this another external circumstance that can impact retention. Students from out of state are typically farther away from their hometown and face extra monetary commitment (Porter, 2000). According to Herzog (2003) out of state students drop out at twice the rate and transfer at 5 times the rate of students from in-state.

Two other factors of influence are the size of the town in which the campus is located and the weather. Having a college or university in a small town can have a negative influence on students that come from a large population area and who expect more to do outside of the academic environment. Weather can also impact a student's decision to leave an institution. The climate in the summer when a student comes to campus can differ greatly in certain areas of the country than the weather in the middle of winter.

“Many more students leave because the institution has failed to create an environment, inside or outside the classroom, that is conducive to their learning and educational needs” (Lau, 2003, p. 2). Students sometimes do not feel connected to the institution either through the classroom or through their social life. Students sometimes fail to make psychological and social adjustments to college life (Clouch, 2010). Being connected to an institution could change a student's attitude and decision to transfer schools.

Jobs impact retention as more and more students tend to have demanding part-time jobs. Polinsky (2002-2003) stated that students who leave college without completing their academic goals work more hours per week than those who complete their academic goals. Employment demands, coupled with financial problems, can be more than enough incentive for students to leave higher education and go full-time into the work force.

### **Internal circumstances**

Lau (2003) stated that internal circumstances that can impact retention can include: the attitudes of faculty and staff toward the students, not being adequately prepared for school, being away from home for the first time, professor competency, student motivation, the strength of academic programs, housing availability, food service, and social atmosphere. Even though some of these appear to be external circumstances, all of these internal circumstances can be

alleviated with some effort from the institution. Each institution has the ability to identify their weak areas and improve them, which should increase the likelihood of students staying at an institution.

Polinsky (2002-2003) stated that the attitudes of faculty and staff toward students can have a positive or negative impact on the student's view of higher education. When faculty and staff are not interested in what students are doing, students notice, and it can have a negative impact on their college experience. "Conversely, instructors can and do make a tremendous positive impact on student success and retention when they show interest in their students, provide stimulating classroom experiences, and relate course content to the 'real world'" (Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 374).

Institutions of higher education can impact students that come to an institution unprepared for the rigors of a college curriculum. Not being well-prepared for the academic rigor presented in higher education can cause a student to leave an institution. Lau (2003) stated that students can feel disconnected and overwhelmed by a regular course load. Feeling overwhelmed may cause the student to transfer in order to try to find their comfort zone. Colleges and universities should have preparatory classes available or have a plan in place to assist students in choosing classes. This will help students achieve success so that the academically unprepared students do not become an attrition statistic.

Homesickness is a reason students use to leave a college or university because many are away from home for the first time. Lundquist et al. (2002-2003) stated that academic and social integration will help students feel at home early in their academic career, which will increase the likelihood they will remain at an institution. Students can become integrated as they interact with

their peers, staff, and university surroundings (Dodgson et al., 2002). Many students simply leave campuses because they never feel like they are a part of the institution.

Lack of professor competency and poor academic programs can cause students to leave an institution. Colleges and universities have an obligation to maintain quality programs with qualified staff. Students can easily figure out when colleges and universities do not provide them with the education they deserve. They can become dissatisfied with the level of education being provided and leave the college or university (Lau, 2003).

Student motivation can be categorized as an external circumstance but can also be considered an internal circumstance. Lau (2003) stated that motivation is influenced by setting goals and understanding expectations, which can both be accomplished through an academic advisor. “Freshmen might lack the motivation to do well in school, because they do not understand the importance of education, and/or do not know how to apply classroom-learned theories to real life problems” (Lau, 2003, p. 2). The impact of their decision may not be realized until they are too far along in life to change their decision.

Lau (2003) stated that campus housing availability, food service, and the social environment can all be greatly influenced by an institution. It would be easy for the student to find an institution that better fits their needs outside of the classroom if any of these three areas are not to the students’ liking. The transition from high school to college can be overwhelming for some students. The stress of the change and being away from home for the first time could cause them to either stop going to class or to transfer to an institution that is located closer to home or is more familiar to them.



## **Strategies to Help Combat Attrition**

The question still remains, what can an institution of higher learning do to combat the attrition problem? Attrition is a problem that needs to be addressed by all institutions and should also be addressed by the students. According to Clounch (2010) the key to enhancing programs to help retention is improvement in program assessment. Programs and strategies can be put into place following a thorough assessment of the issues that face the institution.

There are many different programs and strategies that can be implemented to positively impact retention at an institution. Reason (2003) stated that one of the strategies is to integrate students into the academic life of the institution. By integrating the students in academics, the student will begin to take ownership of their program. When the student feels ownership in a program, the student is more likely to become committed to it. The commitment will lead to a greater desire to stay at an institution which will consequently increase retention.

Another successful retention tool is intervention programs and in particular early intervention programs. Adams (2011) stated that academic coaches having one-on-one interviews with students early in their academic careers can help convey the college's expectations, which will help students adapt to the college. Developing early-alert systems to identify students as soon as they begin to struggle would be very helpful. Early intervention programs will help colleges and universities identify dropout issues and find solutions to keep students in school (Demski, 2011).

Academic goal setting can be a successful tool to assist students. Friedman and Mandel (2009) stated that students with measurable goals are able to focus their efforts on their academics more than students who have vague goals or no goals. Goals that are relevant to a student's life are more likely to motivate the students to meet their goals. "Goal setting research suggests that

goal specificity, relevancy, challenge, commitment, participation, goal feedback, and peer competition enhance performance” (Friedman & Mandel, 2009, p. 230).

Mentoring programs are another tool that can be successful in helping retain students. Research shows that mentoring and goal setting programs successfully assisted students with poor academic performance. The program helped increase the students’ GPAs and retention rates (Friedman & Mandel, 2009).

Regardless of the type of programs or strategies chosen, postsecondary institutions need to develop retention plans. According to Stover (2007), institutions must make student retention a priority and create a culture of collaboration among the staff and faculty. Institutions should collect and analyze information on what is valued by the students and what are positives on the campus. The institution needs to understand the issues that cause attrition and then set goals and create an action plan to combat those issues. The final step is continuing to assess how the retention plan is working.

### **Physical Facilities**

Physical facilities may impact student retention rates. An important physical aspect of a campus is student housing. Student housing should be designed and remodeled to meet the needs of today’s students. This is done by creating a culturally friendly living environment (Lau, 2003). It also means updating furniture to keep a modern look.

Study rooms help enhance a campus. Lau (2003) stated that it is important for students to have a quiet place to study to assist them with their academic pursuits. Students who do well academically are more likely to continue their education rather than drop out, which is common among students who perform poorly academically.

The importance of campus physical facilities cannot be over emphasized. Students need to feel comfortable and safe to excel academically. A good environment with modern facilities will help the students feel at home at their college or university.

### **Technology**

Technology plays an important role in the lives of college students. It is an important form of communication and a common way college students interact today. They would be lost without it. Up-to-date technology gives students the opportunity to learn and communicate in the way they are comfortable. Lau (2003) stated that modern classrooms make students feel comfortable and modern technology in student housing can really help the students feel at home. Outdated technology will cause frustration and can impact whether or not a student stays at an institution or chooses to leave.

Technology can also play an important role in the instructional techniques of the faculty. “Multimedia technology provides effective attention-gathering tools and can be used to enrich and complement classroom teaching and learning, and may even reinvent subject matter” (Lau, 2003, p. 123). Incorporating technology in the classroom certainly impacts the learning of the students in a positive way, which will in turn translate into a greater desire to remain at an institution. According to a survey conducted by Habley, Valiga, McClanahan, and Burkum (2010) faculty use of technology in teaching moderately contributed to the retention of students.

Lau (2003) stated that incorporating hands-on computer lab times will also enhance the learning of students. Regular lessons are important but they can be supplemented by a computer lab experience, which highlights the same material. Students are interested in technology so lab experiences can help the overall learning experience.

## **Instructional Methods**

Faculty members must incorporate different instructional methods in the classroom to positively impact retention. Lau (2003) stated that students need to be challenged to think logically, critically, and imaginatively and for that to happen, faculty members need to teach less theoretically and more practically. Students need to learn practical skills, not just theoretical context, to help them become prepared for their future careers.

An instructional method that can positively impact a student's view of the institution and retention is cooperative learning (Lau, 2003). Cooperative learning involves students working together to learn from one another and teaches them to work effectively in groups. A faculty member should encourage groups to be formed with students of mixed academic levels and mixed academic interests when possible. According to Habley et al. (2010) cooperative education moderately contributed to retention. "Cooperative learning is found to increase student retention, student satisfaction, cognition skills, and active participation" (Lau, 2003, p. 5).

The final type of instructional method used to help retain students is collaborative learning. This method not only encourages student group interaction but also faculty interaction. The idea is that students and faculty can learn from each other. Similar to cooperative learning, students work in groups but the difference is faculty give prompt and constructive feedback and play a larger role in student projects and presentations (Lau, 2003).

## **Student's Responsibilities**

Institutions can make every effort to retain students but ultimately it depends on the student. Smith and Wertlieb (2005) stated that first year students are more concerned with their daily routine change than they are with the academic demands of college. They enter college with unrealistic social and academic expectations.

There are steps students can take to help themselves avoid becoming an attrition statistic. Barefoot (2010) stated that students can develop a clear goal, be flexible in reaching the goal, and work to overcome obstacles to reach the goal. They need to recognize when they should seek help in the form of psychological counseling, financial planning, and academic counseling. The final step students can take to help themselves is learning to manage their financial resources. This may include setting a budget, applying for available financial aid, and getting a part-time job. Students who had positive expectations and who were prepared to adapt fared better than the students who simply had high expectations (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005).

### **The College Personnel Responsible for Retention at the Institution**

Students are in contact with various college personnel on a daily basis. The college personnel have a responsibility to pay attention to students who are disengaged, anxious, and fearful. This will help those students from becoming attrition statistics (Barefoot, 2010).

Faculty members have a profound impact on the retention of students at an institution. There are many things faculty can do in and out of the classroom to help retain students. Faculty members can take time and work with students who need one-on-one attention. They can design useful learning activities so students become capable learners. Lundquist et al. (2002-2003) stated that returning phone calls and emails in a timely manner contributed to student retention. Faculty members can make sure they are accessible and approachable outside of the classroom to provide one-on-one attention. The final important thing faculty members can do is to be personable and approachable (Lau, 2003). “Such behaviors send subtle, but important, symbolic messages that the faculty member and the institution value students” (Lau, 2003, p.6).

Academic advising is a responsibility of most faculty members and is yet another way colleges and universities can positively impact retention. An academic advisor can help motivate

a student to succeed academically. Lau (2003) stated that motivation can come from having clear, explicit learning goals which can be designed with the help of an advisor. The academic advisor helps the student understand what is expected of them in order to succeed.

There are other things that academic advisors should do to help retain students. It is important for advisors to meet with their advisees a minimum of one time per semester and once per month for students who are at risk academically (Frost, 1999). It is also essential for advisors to meet more often with freshmen than it is for them to meet with seniors. New students typically need more guidance for them to get on track academically and programmatically. “Positive reinforcement and support from faculty members will lead to favorable instructional experiences for students, and challenge them to move toward greater academic and interpersonal development” (Lau, 2003, p. 5). Students in private not-for-profit four year institutions are more likely to become integrated when they meet with their academic advisor (Horn, 1998).

Student services include many different offices and can significantly impact the culture of a college, which in turn can positively impact retention. Student services include the Business Office, the Financial Aid Office, the Registrar’s Office, and the Student Life Office. Each of these offices serves students on a regular basis and must look to provide a positive experience for students who visit them.

Business Office personnel regularly have direct contact with students and help students understand their finances. Business Office personnel have the responsibility of making financial aid opportunities and other financial opportunities known to the students. Disseminating this information to students can eliminate financial barriers and consequently help them remain at the institution which increases the retention rate (Frost, 1999).

The Financial Aid Office works with many students and can aid in retention as well. Financial issues are often considered external circumstances, which cannot be controlled by the institution, but that is not necessarily true if students are unaware of their options. “If that is the case, better information dissemination regarding loans, college employment, and financial aid opportunities, something clearly within the college’s control, may aid in retention” (Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 374). Students are often unaware of the financial aid that is available to them. Good financial aid officers help students find creative ways to stay in school, which not only helps the student earn an education but also assists the institution financially and helps retention. In a national survey conducted of private colleges and universities, chief executive officers rated the amount of financial aid available as the second most important factor in attrition (Habley et al., 2010).

The Registrar’s Office sees students on a regular basis regarding academic issues of all kinds. Students seek advice regarding dropping and adding courses. They frequently ask questions regarding academic programs and career choices. It is imperative that staff in the Registrar’s Office know all of the available programs so they can assist students in selecting courses that fulfill general, as well as, major and minor requirements. Receiving inaccurate advice on course selection will frustrate students and may be the reason they decide to transfer out. Students frequently ask for advice regarding the courses needed to help them earn the degree or major necessary to fulfill their career goals. Although the responsibility falls primarily on the shoulders of their academic advisor, employees in the Registrar’s Office can greatly impact students in a positive way by providing sound advice in the absence of their advisor. Incorrect advice or not being able to get advice can give the students a negative impression and cause them to reconsider their college or university choice. The unique position of the Registrar’s Office

enables it to be a tool of the institution for developing and implementing academic policy and planning. It can also be an advocate for students, provide them useful information, as well as, promote and facilitate student success (Blaney, 2009).

The final office in the student service area that has consistent contact with students and impacts their college experience is the Student Life Office. Student Life personnel have direct control over student activities and residence life. The variety and frequency of student activities can impact a student's life outside of the classroom and assist with their social well-being. It may also be a way of encouraging students to utilize social support during their transition to an institution of higher education (DeBerard, et al., 2004). Students may get bored and lose interest in the school if they are not active outside of the classroom. More and varied activities will help students with different interests become involved in the campus community and hopefully will help them feel like a part of the college or university. Habley et al. (2010) found that 89% of private school chief executive officers felt college sponsored social activities were major contributors to retention. Students who are connected to a group or other individuals will be more likely to stay at the institution.

The other component in the student life area is residence life. Eighty-three percent of chief executive officers believed residence hall programs contributed in a major way to the retention of students (Habley et al., 2010). The residence life personnel have an opportunity to create a positive experience for students. A roommate can make or break a college experience. It is important for residence life staff to be aware of problems in their student housing units at the beginning of a semester so they can make necessary adjustments. One or both of the students may leave the institution if roommates are not compatible. Early detection of problems can lead to a



roommate change, which could save someone from becoming an attrition statistic. The more in touch the staff is with the students, the earlier problems will be revealed and hopefully solved.

### **Characteristics of Students Who Stopout**

The reasons students stopout or leave an institution for a semester or two and then either return to that institution or enroll in a different institution are different than for students who simply dropout. Stratton, O'Toole, and Wetzel (2004) stated that about 30% of all students who are degree seeking stopout for at least one term in the 5 years following their initial enrollment. Horn (1998) stated that students who left private, not-for-profit institutions and returned to their original institution were more likely to earn their bachelor's degree than students who did the same thing at a public institution. They were also less likely to leave without earning a degree.

Stratton et al. (2004) stated that students with fewer economic resources are more likely to stopout in order to gather more resources to continue their education. Students with lower grades may seek an easier institution and students with higher grades may seek a more rigorous institution. Another contributor to students who stopout is marriage. Married men and women are more likely to stopout rather than dropout.

Retention is an issue faced by every college and university in the nation. There are many signs and indicators that will help schools identify and recruit students that are likely to succeed and prosper at an institution of higher learning. Student retention for every college and university must be viewed in a holistic light. That is to say "every individual employed by a college has the responsibility and the opportunity to positively impact the environment, and subsequently the success of the students it serves" (Polinsky, 2002-2003, p. 374).

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons students returned to Jamestown College (JC) after they withdrew from JC and were not enrolled at JC for a minimum of one semester.

### Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the main factors that affect a student's decision to return to Jamestown College after a withdrawal of at least one semester?
2. How would they rate the overall quality of these factors?

### Review of Related Literature

The majority of the literature search was conducted using Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Another resource used was the *ProQuest Education Journals*. *National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal* (NASPA) and *Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education* were the final two resources used in the literature review. The resources were found at Raugust Library on the campus of JC.

### Population and Sample

The population of this study was the entire reactivated student population at JC or 43 students. The actual sample that completed the study was 30 reactivated students. Students at JC are issued an exit date when they leave JC. Likewise, students at JC are issued a re-entry date when they reenroll. A report was created to identify these students. The report showed the student's JC identification number, first and last name, email address, original start date, and re-entry date.

## **Instrumentation**

The instrument used in this study was written by the researcher. The instrument is a survey that is in two parts. The first part of the survey instrument is in the form of a 28 item four-point Likert scale. The second part of the instrument includes 12 items. The items are a mixture of short answer and Likert scale questions. Six JC students pilot tested the study for validity and clarity of instructions and items. The survey instrument will be considered valid if the researcher can make appropriate interpretations based on the results of the pilot test. The instrument was critiqued by two JC psychology professors, one part-time communication instructor who is also a full-time staff member at JC, and my graduate school committee members.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected using an online software program titled “Survey Monkey”. The survey link was emailed to all reactivated students at JC on April 27<sup>th</sup>. The survey link was emailed a second time to all students on May 1<sup>st</sup> as a reminder to all non-responders in the hope that they would complete the survey. The email included a description of the survey being conducted along with instructions on how to complete the survey. The results of the survey were downloaded from Survey Monkey into an excel spreadsheet for analysis and review.

## **Data Analysis**

The research questions’ results were analyzed by computing means, standard deviations, and frequencies for all Likert scale items. It was also addressed by determining common themes in non-Likert scale items.

## **CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS**

Chapter 4 provides the findings of the study. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) statement of the problem, (b) research questions, (c) significance of the study, (d) response rate, (e) demographic data, (f) positive impact factors, (g) other influencing factors, and (h) summary.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons students returned to Jamestown College (JC) after they withdrew from JC and were not enrolled at JC for a minimum of one semester.

### **Research Questions**

This study was designed to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the main factors that affect a student's decision to return to Jamestown College after a withdrawal of at least one semester?
2. How would they rate the overall quality of these factors?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study will be useful to JC administration in that it will provide valuable information in the area of student retention. This study will help JC identify key reasons students come back to JC and how those reasons compare to the reasons they came to JC initially. The study will also outline areas of focus to aid in recruiting efforts.

### **Response Rate**

JC had 43 reactivated students enrolled for the 2011-2012 academic year. A reactivated student is a student who returns to a college or university after having been absent for one or more semesters from that college or university. A survey was sent to all of the reactivated students at

JC. The survey contained 28 Likert scale questions asking students to rate the positive impact certain factors had on their return to JC. The factors were put into categories that included faculty, academic advising, academic program, student services, technology, and living environment. The final 12 questions of the survey included a mix of short answer and Likert scale questions. A total of 30 students responded to most of the survey. The students were not required to answer every question in the survey so in the short answer section of the survey as few as 22 responded to some questions.

### Demographic Data

The students surveyed in this study were all students enrolled at JC. Five of the students that responded did not complete the survey question asking for the student’s ID number, so the researcher could not determine the demographics for 5 of the 30 students.

The respondents included 11 males and 14 females. Fifteen of the students were from North Dakota. The other 10 students were from other states and from Canada. Sixteen of the students were seniors, four students were juniors, three students were sophomores, and two students were freshmen. The students’ age ranged from 19 – 33 years old. Fourteen of the students were between the ages of 19 and 22. Seven students were between the ages of 23 and 29. The four remaining students were between 30 and 33. Table 1 outlines the demographics for this study.

Table 1

#### *React Student Demographics*

Gender/Age	Sr	Jr	So	Fr	In-State	Out of State
Males 19-22	4	0	3	1	2	6
Males 23-29	3	0	0	0	1	2
Males 30-33	0	0	0	0	0	0
Females 19-22	3	2	0	1	5	1
Females 23-29	3	1	0	0	3	1
Females 30-33	3	1	0	0	4	0

## Positive Impact Factors

The data contained in tables 2-13 are compiled from the study's survey that asked students to rate the amount of positive impact each factor had on their decision to return to Jamestown College. The survey used a four-point Likert scale scored as follows: 4 = Extremely Impacted, 3 = Somewhat Impacted, 2 = Slightly Impacted, and 1 = Had No Impact. The data will be reported categorically. There are six categories in the first part of the survey which are as follows: Positive Impact of Faculty, Positive Impact of Academic Advising, Positive Impact of Academic Program, Positive Impact of Student Services, Positive Impact of Technology, and Positive Impact of Living Environment.

Data regarding the positive impact faculty had on the return of reactivating students is summarized in Table 2. The mean score for the positive impact of faculty attitudes toward the students was 3.60 ( $SD = 0.81$ ) and had the most positive impact on the decision of students to return to Jamestown College in the faculty category. It also had the greatest positive impact of all factors in the survey. The least positive impact on the decision to return from the faculty category came from the faculty use of technology in the classroom, which recorded a mean score of 2.83 ( $SD = 0.83$ ). Overall the faculty had a positive impact on the student's decision to return to JC as 4 out of 5 mean scores were between extremely impacted and somewhat impact on the Likert scale.

Table 2

### *Positive Impact Faculty Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College*

Faculty	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Faculty attitudes toward students	30	3.60	0.81
Faculty availability outside of the classroom	30	3.50	0.94
Overall quality of the faculty	30	3.50	0.73
Faculty competency	30	3.33	0.88
Faculty use of technology in the classroom	30	2.83	0.83

Table 3 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how faculty at JC positively impacted reactivated students' decision to return to JC after being away for one semester.

Table 3

*Positive Impact Faculty Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Impacted		Somewhat Impacted		Slightly Impacted		No Impact	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Faculty attitudes toward students	22	73.3	6	20.0	0	0.0	2	6.7
Faculty availability outside of the classroom	22	73.3	3	10.0	3	10.0	2	6.7
Overall quality of the faculty	18	60.0	10	33.3	1	3.3	1	3.3
Faculty competency	16	53.3	10	33.3	2	6.7	2	6.7
Faculty use of technology in the classroom	5	16.7	18	60.0	3	13.3	3	10.0

Table 4 contains data regarding the positive impact academic advising had on the decision of students to return to JC. The largest positive impact came from the overall quality of the student's academic advisor, scoring a mean of 2.97 ( $SD = 1.22$ ). The least positive impact was the availability of the student's academic advisor with a mean score of 2.57 ( $SD = 1.25$ ). Academic advising did have a positive impact on the return of reactivated students to JC as the scores were between somewhat impacted and slightly impacted on the Likert scale.

Table 4

*Positive Impact Academic Advising Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College*

Academic Advising	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall quality of academic adviser	30	2.97	1.22
Academic advisor’s helpfulness	30	2.70	1.32
Academic advisor’s availability	30	2.57	1.25

Table 5 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how academic advisors at JC positively impacted reactivated students’ decision to return to JC after being away for one semester.

Table 5

*Positive Impact Academic Advisors Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Impacted		Somewhat Impacted		Slightly Impacted		No Impact	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Overall quality of the academic adviser	14	46.7	8	26.7	1	3.3	7	23.3
Academic adviser’s helpfulness	12	40.0	7	23.3	1	3.3	10	33.3
Academic adviser’s availability	9	30.0	9	30.0	2	6.7	10	33.3

Data summarized in Table 6 outline the positive impact the academic program had on a student’s decision to return to JC. The overall quality of the student’s major had the greatest positive impact on student’s returning to JC in the academic program category scoring a mean of 3.37 (*SD* = 1.00). The least positive impact of the factors in the academic program area with a mean of 2.67 (*SD* = 1.18) was the variety of majors offered. Overall, all of the factors in the academic program indicated a positive impact on the student’s decision to return to JC. Two of the three factors rated between extremely impacted and somewhat impacted on the Likert scale. The other factor rated between somewhat impacted and slightly impacted on the Likert scale.



Table 6

*Positive Impact Academic Program Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College*

Academic Program	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall quality of major	30	3.37	1.00
Strength of your major program of study	30	3.27	1.08
Variety of majors offered	30	2.67	1.18

Table 7 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how the academic program at JC positively impacted reactivated students' decision to return to JC after being away for one semester.

Table 7

*Positive Impact Academic Program Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Impacted		Somewhat Impacted		Slightly Impacted		No Impact	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Overall quality of major	19	63.3	6	20.0	2	6.7	3	10.0
Strength of your major program of study	18	60.0	6	20.0	2	6.7	4	13.3
Variety of majors offered	9	30.0	10	33.3	3	10.0	8	26.7

Data regarding the positive impact student services had on a student's decision to return to JC are summarized in Table 8. The Registrar's office personnel's helpfulness had the greatest positive impact on the student's decision to return scoring a mean of 3.37 ( $SD = 0.96$ ). The least positive influence in the student services category with a mean of 2.00 ( $SD = 1.17$ ) was the cost to attend JC. Student services had some positive impact in every factor on the student's decision to return. Six of seven factors were between the somewhat impacted to slightly impacted areas on the Likert scale. The other factor was between extremely impacted and slightly impacted on the Likert scale.

Table 8

*Positive Impact Student Services Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College*

Student Services	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Registrar office personnel’s helpfulness	30	3.37	0.96
Financial aid office personnel’s helpfulness	30	2.83	1.15
Overall quality of student services	30	2.67	1.18
Availability of financial aid	30	2.60	1.38
Cashier’s helpfulness	30	2.30	1.24
Residence life personnel’s helpfulness	30	2.10	1.35
Cost to attend Jamestown College	30	2.00	1.17

Table 9 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how student services at JC positively impacted reactivated students’ decision to return to JC after being away for one semester.

Table 9

*Positive Impact Student Services Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Impacted		Somewhat Impacted		Slightly Impacted		No Impact	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Registrar office personnel’s helpfulness	19	63.3	5	16.7	4	13.3	2	6.7
Financial aid office personnel’s helpfulness	11	36.7	9	30.0	4	13.3	6	20.0
Overall quality of student services	10	33.3	7	23.3	6	20.0	7	23.3
Availability of financial aid	13	43.3	3	10.0	3	10.0	11	36.7
Cashier’s helpfulness	7	23.3	7	23.3	4	13.3	12	40.0
Residence life personnel’s helpfulness	9	30.0	1	3.3	4	13.3	16	53.3
Cost to attend Jamestown College	4	13.3	8	26.7	2	6.7	16	53.3

Data from Table 10 summarize the positive impact technology had on the decision of students to return to JC. The greatest positive impact was the overall quality of technology, which scored a mean of 2.33 ( $SD = 1.12$ ). The least positive impact, with a mean of 2.03 ( $SD = 1.03$ ) was the speed of internet on campus. Overall, technology had the least positive impact of all other categories on the student's decision to return to JC as demonstrated by a very low mean score for each factor. All three scores were between somewhat impacted and slightly impacted on the Likert scale.

Table 10

*Positive Impact Technology Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College*

Technology	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall quality of campus technology	30	2.33	1.12
Computer availability outside of the classroom	30	2.30	1.32
Speed of internet on campus	30	2.03	1.03

Table 11 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how technology at JC positively impacted reactivated students' decision to return to JC after being away for one semester.

Table 11

*Positive Impact Technology Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Impacted		Somewhat Impacted		Slightly Impacted		No Impact	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Overall quality of campus technology	5	16.7	10	33.3	5	16.7	10	33.3
Computer availability outside of the classroom	8	26.7	7	23.3	1	3.3	14	46.7
Speed of internet on campus	3	10.0	7	23.3	8	26.7	12	40.0

Data from Table 12 summarize the positive impact the living environment had on the decision of students to return to JC. The mean response for the positive impact of the geographic location of campus was 2.87 ( $SD = 1.14$ ) and offered the greatest impact of the factors included in the living environment category. The least positive impact on students returning to JC was weather, which scored a mean of 1.60 ( $SD = 1.00$ ). The living environment had a positive impact on the student's decision to return to JC. Four of the six factors were between somewhat impacted and slightly impacted on the Likert scale. Only two of the six factors rated between slightly impacted and had no impact on the Likert scale.

Table 12

*Positive Impact the Living Environment Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College*

<u>Living Environment</u>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Geographic location of the campus	30	2.87	1.14
Overall quality of the living environment	30	2.70	1.15
Activities outside of the classroom	30	2.13	1.14
Variety of campus activities	30	2.00	1.17
Frequency of campus activities	30	1.93	1.11
Quality of the food service	30	1.67	0.99
Weather at Jamestown College	30	1.60	1.00

Table 13 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how the living environment at JC positively impacted reactivated students' decision to return to JC after being away for one semester.

Table 13

*Positive Impact the Living Environment Had on the Decision to Return to Jamestown College – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Impacted		Somewhat Impacted		Slightly Impacted		No Impact	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Geographic location of the campus	12	40.0	7	23.3	6	20.0	5	16.7
Overall quality of the living environment	9	30.0	10	33.3	4	13.3	7	23.3
Activities outside of the classroom	5	16.7	6	20.0	7	23.3	12	40.0
Variety of campus activities	5	16.7	5	16.7	5	16.7	15	50.0
Frequency of campus activities	4	13.3	5	16.7	6	20.0	15	50.0
Quality of food service	2	6.7	5	16.7	4	13.3	19	63.3
Weather at Jamestown College	3	10.0	2	6.7	5	16.7	20	66.6

**Other Influencing Factors**

The next survey question asked the students if JC was the student’s first choice of colleges. Twenty students responded that JC was their first choice of colleges. The other 10 stated that JC was not their first choice of schools.

The data summarized in Table 14 is derived from the survey question that asked how influential in the student’s decision to attend was the fact that JC was a 4-year private college. This part of the survey instrument used a four-point Likert scale scored as follows: 4 = Extremely Influential, 3 = Very Influential, 2 = Somewhat Influential, and 1 = Not Influential. The mean was 2.53 (*SD* 1.11) for how influential being a 4-year private college was in the student’s decision to attend.

Table 14

*How Influential in Your Decision to Attend Was the Fact That Jamestown College Is a 4-Year Private College*

Decision to Attend	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How Influential	30	2.53	1.11

Table 15 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how influential in the student’s decision to attend was the fact that JC is a 4-year private college.

Table 15

*How Influential in Your Decision to Attend Was the Fact That Jamestown College Is a 4-Year Private College – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Influential		Very Influential		Somewhat Influential		Not Influential	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
How Influential	8	26.7	6	20.0	10	33.3	6	20.0

Table 16 summarizes the data for the question that asked for the reasons these students selected JC initially. Twenty-seven students responded to this question.

Table 16

*Reasons Students Came to Jamestown College Initially*

Initial Attendance	Number of Students
Intercollegiate Athletics	12
Location of College; Close to Home	7
Academic Program	4
Tuition waiver/Scholarship	2
Student/teacher ratio	1
Feel like part of a family	1

Table 17 summarizes the data from 27 students detailing the reasons they decided to leave Jamestown College.

Table 17

*What Were the Reasons You Decided to Leave Jamestown College*

Reasons Students Left	Number of Students
Graduated/Completed Program at JC	5
Athletics	4
Illness	3
Be with significant other	3
Wasn't dedicated to college	2
Pursue other programs	2
Personal matters	2
Death in the family	1
Poor major quality	1
Weather	1
Explore other cities	1
Transfer of credits	1

Table 18 summarizes the data from 25 students detailing what they did when they withdrew from JC and were not enrolled at JC for a minimum of one semester.

Table 18

*What Did You Do After Withdrawing from Jamestown College*

What students did	Number of Students
Attended another school	13
Worked	10
Hospitalized	2

Table 19 summarizes the data from 25 students detailing the reasons they decided to return to JC.

Table 19

*What Were the Reasons You Decided to Return to Jamestown College*

Reasons Students Returned	Number of Students
Athletics	5
Program of study	5
Close to home	4
Complete education	4
Didn't enjoy new school	2
Small class/student body size	2
Successful in classes at Jamestown College	1
Planned to return the entire time	1
Credits were not accepted at new school	1

Table 20 summarizes the answers to how confident students were when they first decided to attend a four-year institution that they would complete their program of study. A four-point Likert scale was used to score student responses as follows: 4 = Extremely Confident, 3 = Very Confident, 2 = Somewhat Confident, and 1 = Not Confident. The mean score for how confident students were they would finish their program of study was 3.17 ( $SD = 0.91$ ).

Table 20

*How Confident Were You When You First Decided to Attend a 4-Year Institution of Higher Education That You Would Be Able to Complete Your Required Program of Study*

Finishing Program of Study	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Level of Confidence	30	3.17	0.91

Table 21 provides a frequency distribution (number of respondents and corresponding percentage) of how confident students' were when they first decided to attend a 4-year institution of higher education that they would be able to complete the required program of study.

Table 21

*How Confident Were You When You First Decided to Attend a 4-Year Institution of Higher Education That You Would Be Able to Complete Your Required Program of Study – Frequency Distribution*

	Extremely Confident		Very Confident		Somewhat Confident		Not Confident	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Level of Confidence	14	46.7	8	26.7	7	23.3	1	3.3

Table 22 summarizes the data from the question asking the students about their top academic goals when they returned to JC. Twenty-six students responded to the question.



Table 22

*Please Enter the Top Academic Goals You Set When You Returned to Jamestown College*

Academic Goals	Number of Students
Graduate	17
Higher Grades	4
Accepted into the Nursing Program	2
Acquire Information and Knowledge	1
Inducted into Nursing Honor Society	1
None	1

Table 23 summarizes the data detailing what the student's like least about JC since they returned. Twenty-five students responded to this question.

Table 23

*Now That You Returned to Jamestown College, What Do You Like Least*

What students like least	Number of Students
Cost	5
Professors	3
Food	2
Availability of Classes	2
Nothing	2
Course Material	1
Cold Weather	1
Lack of Financial Aid	1
Geographic Location	1
Class Attendance Rules	1
Writing Papers	1
Not Enough Real Life Knowledge	1
My Advisor/Lack there of	1
My Peers and Helpfulness of Professors	1
90 Miles from Where I Live	1
Students are not Cultured	1

Table 24 summarizes data from the question asking students what they like most about JC since they returned. Twenty-three students responded to this question.

Table 24

*Now That You Returned to Jamestown College, What Do You Like Most*

What students like most	Number of Students
Staff/Faculty	8
Class Size	3
Faculty/Staff Help Always Available	3
Small School Feel	2
College Athletics	1
Physical Education Department	1
N/A	1
The Community	1
Everything at JC is Home	1
High Quality Nursing Program	1
Classmates and Teachers	1

Table 25 summarizes the data for 22 students detailing what the students would change at JC.

Table 25

*What Would You Change About Jamestown College*

Changes	Number of Students
Cost	7
Nothing	3
Update Facilities	2
Make it a Wet Campus	2
Overhaul the Business Department	1
Better Advisor	1
Course Availability	1
Professor Selection Process	1
Attendance Policy	1
Change Food Companies	1
Deeper Understanding of Material	1
Representation of Transfer Students	1

**Summary**

The survey results reported here provided valuable information from the reactivated students at JC. The data provided will help the researcher determine what JC does well and what JC needs to improve. This information will help JC improve retention, which in the long-run will help improve the institution financially, academically, and in the view of stakeholders.

## **CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, DISCUSSION OF ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS REACHED, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Chapter 5 will present a summary, discussion of analysis, conclusions reached, and recommendations.

### **Summary**

#### **Purpose**

Jamestown College (JC) is a small liberal arts college located in south-central North Dakota. Retention is a concern of the administration of the college. The focus of this study was to find out what JC does well in terms of retaining students by examining the students who leave JC for a minimum of one semester and then return to finish their degree.

The purpose of the study was to determine the reasons students returned to JC after they withdrew from JC and were not enrolled at JC for a minimum of one semester. The study will be useful to JC administration in that it will provide valuable information in the area of student retention. The study will also help JC identify key reasons students come back to JC and how those reasons compare to the reasons they came to JC initially. The study outlines areas of focus to aid in recruiting efforts.

#### **Methodology**

The population for this study was the entire reactivated student population at JC or 43 students. The actual sample who completed the study was 30 reactivated students. Students at JC are given an exit date when they leave and a re-entry date if they return. A report was created by the researcher to identify all reactivated students. The report included the student's JC identification number, first and last name, email address, original start date, and re-entry date.

The survey instrument for the study was written by the researcher. The survey instrument contained two parts. The first part consisted of 28 four point Likert scale questions asking how different factors positively impacted the student's decision to return to JC. The questions were divided into categories that included faculty, academic advising, academic program, student services, technology, and living environment. The second part of the survey contained 12 short answer and Likert scale questions. The survey instrument was reviewed by two JC psychology professors, one JC communication instructor and the researcher's graduate school committee to determine validity.

The data was collected using an online software program titled "Survey Monkey". The survey link was emailed to the reactivated students two times, one week apart. The second time was in order to remind all non-responders. The email included a description of the survey being conducted along with instructions on how to complete the survey and that they were under no obligation to take part in the study.

The data were analyzed using SPSS software for the Likert scale questions in order to determine means and standard deviations. The non-Likert scale items were analyzed by determining common themes.

### **Findings**

Thirty of the possible 43 students responded to the survey instrument. The students were not required to answer every question in the survey so in the short answer section of the survey as few as 22 responded to some questions. Valuable information regarding what positively impacted student's decisions to return was gained by the results of the survey instrument.

The most positive impact came from the Positive Impact of the Faculty category of the instrument. Twenty-two (73.3%) of the responding students said that faculty attitudes toward the

students extremely impacted their decision to return to JC. Faculty attitudes toward students also had the highest mean score which was 3.60 ( $SD = 0.81$ ). Other factors with high positive impact included faculty availability outside of the classroom. Twenty-two (73.3%) of the responding students said that faculty availability outside of the classroom extremely impacted their decision to return to JC. Faculty availability outside of the classroom had a mean of 3.50 ( $SD = 0.94$ ). Overall quality of the faculty had a mean of 3.50 ( $SD = 0.73$ ) with 18 (60%) of the students stating that the overall quality of the faculty extremely impacted their decision to return and 10 (33.3%) of the students stating that it somewhat impacted their decision to return.

Factors with no positive impact to slight positive impact came primarily from the living environment category. Weather at JC had a mean of 1.60 ( $SD = 1.00$ ) with 20 (66.6%) of the responding students stating that it had no positive impact on their decision to return to JC. A factor that slightly positively impacted the students' decision was the frequency of campus activities with a mean of 1.93 ( $SD = 1.11$ ). Fifteen (50.0%) of the responding students stated that frequency of campus activities had no positive impact and 6 (20.0%) of the responding students said frequency of campus activities slightly positively impacted their decision to return to JC. The variety of campus activities with a mean of 2.00 ( $SD = 1.17$ ) and cost to attend JC with a mean of 2.00 ( $SD = 1.17$ ) both slightly impacted the students' decision to return to JC. Fifteen (50.0%) of the responding students said that the variety of campus activities had no positive impact on their decision to return to JC. Sixteen (53.3%) of the responding students said that the cost to attend had no positive impact on their decision to return to JC. Overall, the weather and campus activities had no positive impact to slight positive impact on the students attending JC. Cost was also a factor that had only a slight positive impact on the students' decision to attend JC.

Students were asked about the reasons they came to JC the first time. Twelve of the 27 responding students (44.4%) stated that participation in athletics was the reason they decided to attend JC initially. Seven of the 27 responding students (25.9%) stated that JC was close to home so that was the reason they attended initially.

Students were also asked why they decided to leave JC. No single reason emerged from this question, but the responses ranged from athletics and illness to personal matters.

The next question in the survey instrument asked what students did after they withdrew. Thirteen of the 25 responding students (52.0%) attended another school and 10 of the 25 responding students (40.0%) worked.

The reasons they returned to JC was the next question asked. Again, there was no particular reason why they decided to return. Program of study, athletics, close to home, and to complete their education were the most popular answers.

Students were asked what their top academic goals were once they returned. Seventeen of the 26 students that responded (65.4%) said graduating was their top academic goal.

The next two questions asked students what they liked least and what they liked most about JC now that they returned. What they liked least was the high cost to attend but that was only 5 students out of 25 (20.0%). Eleven out of 25 students who responded (44.0%) liked the availability, helpfulness, and the personal touch of the faculty and staff the most.

The final question was what the students would change about JC. Seven out of 22 students (31.8%) responded that they would lower the cost of attending the college.

### **Discussion of Analysis**

What are the main factors that affect a student's decision to return to Jamestown College after a withdrawal of at least one semester?

The faculty and staff of JC had the most positive impact of all factors on the students who returned to JC. Lau (2003) stated that it was important for faculty members to work one-on-one with students, to be approachable, and to be accessible outside of the classroom. The faculty at JC demonstrated this by being accessible and friendly to students. That came across in the results of the study with the question that asked about the faculty attitude toward students which had a mean of 3.60 with twenty-two of thirty responding students (73.3%) stating that faculty attitude toward students extremely impacted their decision to return to JC. The faculty availability outside of the classroom is also evidence of the faculty impact. It had a mean of 3.50 and twenty-two responding students (73.3%) stating that faculty availability outside of the classroom extremely impacted their decision to return to JC. It will be very important in the future for JC to continue encouraging the faculty to continue to be personable with and get to know their students.

Research stated that it is important for academic advisors to meet with their students on a regular basis to help set goals and keep them motivated (Lau, 2003). This is being accomplished at JC as evidenced by the mean score of 2.97 from the survey question inquiring as to the positive impact of the overall quality of the academic advisor. Fourteen of 30 students (46.7%) said the overall quality of the academic advisor extremely positively impacted their decision to return to JC and 8 of 30 students said it somewhat positively impacted their decision to return to JC. The academic advisor is an important person in helping the student set goals and accomplish those goals. Now that the students returned to JC, 17 of 26 (65.4%) said their goal was to graduate and according to research the advisor can help them with that goal.

Students are concerned about their financial situation. The financial aid office personnel have the responsibility to disseminate information regarding loans, college employment, and financial aid opportunities (Polinsky, 2002-2003). They can certainly help alleviate some of the

financial concern by educating the students on the availability of financial assistance. According to the survey of the reactivated students the financial aid office personnel had a somewhat positive impact on retention with a mean of 2.83. Eleven of 30 students (36.6%) said the financial aid officer personnel's helpfulness extremely positively impacted their decision to return to JC and 9 of 30 students (30.0%) stated that it somewhat positively impacted their decision to return to JC. The financial aid office personnel work well with the students and are able to meet most students' needs.

According to Blaney (2009), the Registrar's Office personnel can be advocates for students, provide information to students, and promote and facilitate student success. The Registrar's Office personnel are succeeding in doing this as evidenced by the extreme to somewhat positive impact they had on the reactivated students' decision to return. The mean on the question regarding the positive impact was a 3.37 and was the highest score in the student service category. Nineteen of 30 students (63.3%) stated that the registrar's office personnel's helpfulness extremely positively impacted their decision to return to JC.

Lau (2003) stated that modern classrooms make students feel comfortable and modern technology in student housing can really help students feel at home. Outdated technology will cause frustration and may impact whether a student decides to stay or leave an institution. Having a mean of 2.33 for overall quality of campus technology and a mean of 2.03 for speed of internet on campus showed that they had a slight positive impact on the student's return to JC. Ten of 30 students (33.3%) said the overall quality of campus technology had no impact and 10 of 30 students (33.3%) said it somewhat positively impacted their decision to return to JC. For the speed of internet, 20 of 30 students surveyed (66.6%) stated that that it either slightly positively impacted or had no impact on their decision to return to JC.



JC can improve in the student life area of student services. The first area in student life is student activities. Hable et al. (2010) stated that 89% of private school chief executive officers felt college sponsored activities were major contributors to retention. According to this survey's results, the reactivated students rated the variety of campus activities, the frequency of activities, and the activities outside of the classroom low on the positive impact it had on their return. The mean for the variety of activities was 2.00 with 15 of 30 students (50.0%) stating that the variety of activities had no impact on their decision to return. The mean for frequency of activities was 1.93 also with 15 of 30 students (50.0%) stating that it had no impact on their decision to return to JC. For activities outside of the classroom the mean was 2.13 with 12 of 30 students (40.0%) stating it had no impact on their decision to return to JC. JC could do more to improve in these areas to make activities a more important part of the campus culture.

The second important area in student life is residence life. The residence life personnel's helpfulness had a mean of 2.10 with 16 of 30 students (53.3%) stating it had no impact on their decision to return. Students experience stress being away from home and transitioning from high school to college (Lau, 2003). The personnel in residence life can make this transition easier by helping the students feel at home.

Overall, it is clear that the people of JC give the students a reason to return or to continue at another institution. The college personnel have a responsibility to pay attention to students who are disengaged, anxious, and fearful. This will help those students from becoming attrition statistics (Barefoot, 2010). The faculty, academic advisors, and staff have the opportunity to greatly impact the decision of leaving or staying at JC.

## **Conclusions Reached**

The study of reactivated students at JC yielded some answers to the question what main factors affect a student's decision to return to JC. One conclusion that can be made is that the faculty at JC has the most significant positive influence on the student's decision to return to JC of all of the factors that were studied for this group of reactivated students. The mean and frequency distribution for the faculty category of the survey instrument was higher by far than the mean or frequency distribution for any other category proving that the faculty has the most positive impact on the reactivated student's decision to return to JC.

The mean and frequency distribution for the overall quality of the academic advisor demonstrates that the academic advisor also had a positive impact on the reactivated students' decision to return to JC. Academic advisors at JC are always faculty members.

Another conclusion that can be made from the findings is the staff at JC had a positive influence on the reactivated students' return to JC. The mean and frequency distribution from the Registrar's Office personnel's helpfulness question and the Financial Aid Office personnel's helpfulness question demonstrates a somewhat positive impact.

Another supporting find in the study was when asked what they like most about JC, 50% of the students' who responded stated faculty or the staff of JC. The faculty or staff has a positive impact on the reactivated students returning to JC.

The final positive conclusion from the data is that the overall strength of the academic program and the quality of the major program of study positively impacted the reactivated students' decision to return to JC. This was demonstrated by the mean and frequency distribution for the questions regarding the strength of your major program of study and the overall quality of the major.

Some of the findings revealed areas with slight positive impact that could be addressed. The first one is that the student life department could address student activities. The frequency of activities, variety of activities, and activities outside of the classroom all had very low means and the frequency distribution indicated that they had only slight positive impact on the reactivated students' decision to return to JC.

Another conclusion can be made based on the slight positive impact of the overall quality of technology and speed of the internet. The mean scores and frequency distribution indicated a slight positive impact on the return of reactivated students to JC. Technology is very important to this generation of students and needs to be constantly upgraded to increase student satisfaction.

All of the conclusions can certainly aid the administration of JC in the retention battle. The conclusions voiced here should demonstrate to the administration of JC that the people they hire for faculty and staff positions play an extremely important role in student retention. Faculty and staff need to be personable, competent, have positive attitudes toward students, and must be willing to be available to students outside of regular hours. This includes everyone hired from the facilities, maintenance, and food service workers to the highest level faculty members.

The administration must also build strong academic programs and majors in order to attract new students and to keep the students JC has. This includes investing in technology and creating new majors to meet the needs of the students and society in general.

The final step for the administration is to make sure the student life area of the college meets the needs of the students. More and varied student activities need to be available for students in order to meet the needs of students outside of the classroom.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations from the Study**

The first recommendation that comes from this study is to make sure faculty and staff keep working hard at making students their top priority. The JC faculty appear to be doing a good job making students feel important by working with them individually and making time for them outside of the classroom. The same can be said about most of the staff outlined in this survey. It is important for the faculty and staff at JC to keep doing a good job in these areas. Training for faculty and staff regarding the importance of treating students in this manner should be conducted on a yearly basis to ensure good customer service.

The second recommendation is to improve the student life area in both student activities and in residence life. Students need to have a larger variety and more frequent campus activities. The student life personnel should have students assist in planning and executing more campus activities to ensure the activities are meeting the needs of the students.

The residence life personnel need to improve the way they operate to positively impact all students at JC. Proper training on the needs of students in the residence halls has to be conducted to help improve this area.

The final recommendation is to improve technology on campus. The speed of the internet needs to be improved and the campus technology needs to improve across campus.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study focused on a very small group of students at JC. The survey instrument should be modified slightly and given to the entire student body. The current survey instrument is designed for students who withdrew and then returned to JC. The majority of the student body never withdrew so all of the questions regarding leaving and returning to JC would not apply.

The college could glean valuable information by receiving the opinions of the entire student body rather than just the opinions of a small group of students who left and decided to return.

Specifically, the college could determine if the faculty and staff were as large of a positive factor for the regular student body as they were to the reactivated students.

The survey instrument was given online. Some of the answers given by the reactivated students were vague and didn't give the researcher very much information. For instance, some of the reactivated students answered the question about what they like most about JC with *the faculty*. That doesn't help the researcher because the answers weren't specific enough. The researcher could conduct one-on-one interviews or student focus groups with the students. This would help the researcher gain more specific answers. When a student would give an answer like *the faculty*, the researcher could follow up with a question asking specifically what about the faculty does the student like. This would help the researcher get more in depth information and more valuable information for the college.

This particular study was focused solely on the positive impact a factor had on returning students. Another survey could be conducted asking about the negative impact factors that made the student's leave the institution.

The study had a group of factors that rated between slightly positively impacted and had no impact. A follow-up study on these factors could be conducted to determine if the college needs to improve these areas. The student's indicated that these areas do not positively impact them. The question for the college would be do these factors negatively impact students. A survey on these factors could reveal this and help the college improve if they do negatively impact the students.

The final recommendation is to conduct this study at a college similar to JC in North Dakota. The student population would have to be similar to the student population at JC. The information gained from the survey at a different school could help JC officials in their own retention efforts.

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## APPENDIX. SURVEY INSTRUMENT

### React Retention Survey

By clicking on this button, you confirm that you are giving consent to participate in this study.

How much did the following factors positively impact your decision to return to Jamestown College? Please answer by placing a checkmark in the appropriate box following each item.

		Extremely Impacted	Somewhat Impacted	Slightly Impacted	Had No Impact
<b>Faculty</b>					
1	Faculty attitudes toward students				
2	Faculty use of technology in the classroom				
3	Faculty competency				
4	Faculty availability outside of the classroom				
5	Overall quality of the faculty				
<b>Academic Advising</b>					
6	Academic advisors availability				
7	Academic advisors helpfulness				
8	Overall quality of Academic Advising				
<b>Academic Program</b>					
9	Strength of your major program of study				
10	Variety of majors offered				
11	Overall quality of major				
<b>Student Services</b>					
12	Registrar Office personnel's helpfulness				

		Extremely Impacted	Somewhat Impacted	Slightly Impacted	Had No Impact
13	Financial Aid Office personnel's helpfulness				
14	Availability of financial aid				
15	Cashier's helpfulness				
16	Cost to attend Jamestown College				
17	Residence life personnel's helpfulness				
18	Overall quality of the student services				
<b>Technology</b>					
19	Computer availability outside of the classroom				
20	Speed of internet on campus				
21	Overall quality of campus technology				
<b>Living Environment</b>					
22	Quality of food service				
23	Variety of campus activities				
24	Frequency of campus activities				
25	Activities outside of the classroom				
26	Geographic location of the campus				
27	Weather at Jamestown College				
28	Overall quality of living environment				

**Please answer the following questions.**

29. Was Jamestown College your first choice of colleges? \_\_Yes \_\_No

30. How influential in your decision to attend was the fact that Jamestown College is a 4-year private college?  
 Extremely Influential  Very Influential  Somewhat Influential  Not Influential
31. What were the reasons you decided to attend Jamestown College initially?
32. What were the reasons you decided to leave Jamestown College?
33. What did you do after withdrawing from Jamestown College?
34. What were the reasons you decided to return to Jamestown College?
35. How confident were you when you first decided to attend a 4-year institution of higher education that you would be able to complete your required program of study?  
 Extremely Confident  Very Confident  Somewhat Confident  Not Confident
36. Please enter the top academic goals you set for yourself when you returned to Jamestown College.
37. Now that you returned to Jamestown College, what do you like least about the college?
38. Now that you returned to Jamestown College, what do you like most about the college?
39. What would you change about Jamestown College?
40. Student ID number \_\_\_\_\_