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Critical college experiences of the middle third of the high school graduating class

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CRITICAL COLLEGE EXPERIENCES OF THE MIDDLE THIRD OF THE HIGH
SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASS

by

Nathan Kaoru Keikiokamakua Hanamaikai

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies
(Educational Leadership and Higher Education)

Under the Supervision of Professor Barbara LaCost

Lincoln, Nebraska

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CRITICAL COLLEGE EXPERIENCES OF THE MIDDLE THIRD
OF THE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASS

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University of Nebraska, 2016

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Seven recent graduates from a large, open access university in the Western United States who also graduated from high school in the middle third of their graduating class were interviewed to examine what they considered critical decisions during college and what effect those decisions had on their progress towards graduation. More than 45 critical incidents were identified by the participants. All incidents involved interaction with another person to some degree. All but 11 of the incidents were with people outside of institutional employees. Of the 11 incidents, the majority involved faculty members in either positive or negative situations. Upon further review, 301 experiences were identified by the researcher, but these were not deliberately identified by the participants as critical incidents. These experiences impacted the collegiate experience of each participant and will, therefore, be discussed in the present study.

An incident of falling out of a moving vehicle is used as a metaphor to highlight the subtleties in the differences between staying in college and dropping out. The behaviors exhibited by the participants as they described them are compared. Four basic themes of critical incidents emerged: basic needs, type and nature of experiences, common participant traits shown through the experiences, and short- and long-term

effects of their individual experiences. Participants were found to share two common needs, experience six types of incidents, and express two common personality traits that appeared to have an impact on their decision-making processes and outcomes. The effects of the decisions fell into four categories. Three of these categories are short-term and one is long-term in nature.

To summarize the relationship of these findings, three key drivers are identified. Careful examination of these drivers indicates that middle-performing students tend to be motivated to have a personalized educational experience or no experience at all. Because of this dichotomy, these drivers directly influence retention and completion among this group.

Finally, potential implications for institutional funding, academic advisement, retention and completion initiatives, and campus-wide interventions driven by staff and faculty are discussed.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to countless of the unseen, unnumbered, and unassisted who go through school without realizing their full potential, whose lives are full of “only ifs” and “what might have beens” and to what they could have been, and could have done had they received the help they needed when they needed it. This work is dedicated to the “average-sized” fish in an ever-bloating pond.

Acknowledgement

There are many who cheered me on and kept air under my wings throughout this journey, as well as several who pointed me in the right direction to even take the first steps. From the time my wife, Tanya, and I discussed pursuing a doctoral degree she has been my constant critical experience, helping me to make the right decisions, and supporting me throughout it all. I am awestruck by the ease with which my children supported making sacrifices for me to walk this path. I have been overwhelmed by the goodness and kind-hearted, yet firm support from Dr. Barbara LaCost, whom I have the privilege of calling my adviser and mentor. I followed the example of my father, Robert, who sticks with things even when the situation is unsavory and difficult—thanks for your example of persistence. Lastly, the memory of my mother, Kathleen, pushed me along at times when nobody else was around to keep me from “falling out of the van.” To you all, I owe my heartiest gratitude, and a lifetime of devotion to paying the same forward to others in need.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I was a young boy, I had a job as a newspaper delivery boy. My father helped me wake up in the morning, fold the papers, and then helped me load them in the family van to deliver around our neighborhood. We drove with the door open to allow me to exit the van more quickly, which normally did not cause any problems. One particular morning when my father must have been in a rush—I could tell because we were driving a little faster than normal—he made the planned U-turn in the route. That morning, I fell out as he completed the U-turn and proceeded along the route for the next delivery. As I peeled myself off the pavement, I realized that there were signs that indicated to me that I was off balance and at risk of falling out. I had never fallen out of or off a moving vehicle before, and I suppose I did not know what those signs were telling me until it was too late.

I also had many friends who were much wilder than I was and never seemed to have a scratch on them. Maybe I never saw the scratches. Maybe I saw them but never thought to ask if they got them from falling out of a moving vehicle. Maybe they were so used to falling out and getting up that the fall did not even faze them anymore. In the speed that all young boys go about living their lives, I never gave it a second thought that others around me had experienced similar situations, and could have illuminated my understanding and capabilities for preventing a fall from a moving vehicle. Unfortunately, this skill would not come my way until after actually falling out and learning the hard lesson on my own.

Context of the Problem

In a similar fashion, many first-year college students are confronted with numerous indicators that they are about to “fall out of the van” academically, but they do not recognize what is happening until it is too late, and they find themselves picking themselves up “off the street.” Additionally, there are others in similar situations that do not fall, who seem to find a way to keep their balance and proceed towards completing a degree successfully, sometimes surviving despite struggling from the outset. What do these survivors know or do differently that leads them to graduate, when their companions from very similar circumstances do not? Educators must understand the challenges these students confront through their eyes to better assist students in similar situations.

It is common practice for institutions of higher learning to collect, measure, and assess various applicant inputs as a way of discerning a student’s ability to succeed. This is referred to as the admissions process. Such input can include high school GPA, advance placement test scores, and high school class rank, among others. In related fashion, higher education institutions also measure outputs. One measured output is graduation rate, or the percentage of students who graduate from a given entering cohort. Related to this is the amount of time it takes a student to graduate. Graduation rates are commonly measured at 4-, and 6-year timeframes, though other time denominations are measured.

At a large, public, open admissions institution in the Western United States, high school rank, a ranking that is related to the admissions input of high school GPA, is often

reported in thirds—upper third, middle third, and lower third. Since not all GPAs are reported in this manner, a GPA range approximating the range of GPAs representing the thirds was used to allow all GPAs to be evaluated by the same criteria. Traditional students who are admitted as full-time, bachelors-seeking students at this institution, and who were in the middle third range of their high school graduating class tend to finish a degree at the same institution at a rate which is much lower than their counterparts in the upper third range in a 6-year graduation horizon (12.4% and 30.4%, respectively) (Western United States University, 2013).

Problem Statement

While the manner in which college completion is measured is still under debate (Selingo, 2012), the national completion rate has not changed significantly since the 1970s per one report (Brock, 2010), and has decreased according to another (ACT, 2016). Not only is this alarming for the nation, but also it brings to light our current lack of understanding of how to impact completion rates. Since 1983, college graduation rates for four-year degrees varied between 36% in 2013 to 52.8% in 1986 at all four-year, public institutions (ACT, 2016). Currently research on the middle group of students is lacking. We know that approximately 68.2% of a large population falls within one standard deviation of the mean. This means that the middle-performers represent a very large group of all postsecondary students. We need to know more about how educators can better serve the needs of the middle-performing students.

This study explored the college experiences of higher education graduates who have been middle-performers in high school. I used a qualitative interview design to

gather information on the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). This format allowed for deep exploration of emerging themes based on participant answers.

Research Questions

While there is a wealth of information about potential institution-driven interventions, a void of understanding the student point-of-view exists. The purpose of this study was to examine how students describe critical decisions that they now recognize were decisions crucial to their persistence towards degree completion. The following grand tour question guided the study: How do college graduates from the middle third of their high school graduating class describe critical decisions during their academic career? The sub-questions included:

1. How do graduates describe critical incidents they addressed in order to persist and graduate?
2. How do graduates describe the situations, as they now understand them?
3. How do graduates describe the situations, as they understood them as they were making decision during these incidents?
4. How did the decisions they made affect them in the short-term?
5. How did the decisions they made affect them in the long-term?

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the term *critical decision* is defined as any decision made by a participant that was identified during the interview as having a significant impact for the participant. The participant also defines what is seen as *significant*. The intent of the participant-driven definition is to capture the way the participant viewed the

incident, especially in situations in which the participant did not readily recognize the decision as critical, realizing later that the decision greatly impacted his or her degree completion.

Delimitations and Limitations

I examined only the experiences of graduates from their perspectives as students. In their recounting of their experiences, there are likely to be unintentional and intentional omissions of events that influenced their degree completion, and their insight will not likely account for all contributing factors. The stories are expected to be one-sided and incomplete. In addition, since a purposeful sample was used, the results are not generalizable.

Researcher Bias

It is inevitable to avoid bias in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Wolcott, 2009). Acknowledgment of the biases allows the researcher and the readers to interpret the findings on their own (Creswell, 2013; Wolcott, 2009). That said, I acknowledge the following known biases:

1. I am from a very similar demographic cross-section from which the participants in the sample were selected. I experienced the phenomenon that is explored in this study.
2. I believe that students, faculty, administrators, and staff all have the duty to acknowledge and hold themselves accountable for practices that are detrimental to the success of average students.

3. I feel that there too many talented students, who could be successful in college and careers, that fall through the cracks due to deficient approaches in counseling and advising.
4. I have strong feelings about the need for greater personalization of advising, coaching, and mentoring practices in both public schools, and institutions of higher education in preparing students for postsecondary studies.
5. At the time of performing this research, I was serving as an administrator of a college preparation program that serves many students with similar backgrounds to the participants in the sample group. My belief in the cause of the program has a great influence on how I interpret participant stories.

Summary

I am very interested in this topic because it represents a personal lived experience. I did not seek, however, to imbue my views on the related stories of the participants. This is also a major reason for selecting the type of research design I chose. The participants' views of the events and decisions they described as critical, illuminate ways that other students can self-administer potential solutions to their problems as they see and interpret them—to help them recognize they are about to “fall out of the van.” I sought to identify a common thread between each participant's experiences and decisions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are relatively few studies, quantitative or qualitative, that address the academic experiences of higher education students that had ranked academically in the middle group of their high school graduating class. Even fewer studies follow these students into or through college. I begin the literature review with a definition of retention and completion and then discuss (a) an overview of issues with postsecondary student retention and completion, (b) tendencies in research regarding completion, (c) possible areas of influence on a student's choice to continue or discontinue postsecondary studies (d) the adequacy of current research for implementation with the middle group and (e) emerging research.

Definition of Retention and Completion

Education professionals focus much of their time and resources on addressing the issue of retention, which is defined as the percentage of students who enroll in their second year at the same institution during the semester following the completion of their first year (Department of Education, n. d.). Some argue that this definition leaves some types of institutions at a handicap when comparing retention statistics due to the nature of the students, and the programs traditionally offered at said institutions—technical schools or community colleges, for example (Selingo, 2012). However, if the focus of retention remains on retention of a student within the system of postsecondary education, as Tinto explains (2012), the intent and purpose of discussing retention remains more focused on the success of the *student*, as opposed to the success of the institution where the student

began his or her studies. As Tinto (1987) put it previously, retention initiatives should focus on education, not retention or persistence of the student because it is assumed that the education of the student is of primary impact on the overall success of the student.

Completion occurs when a student finishes all the requirements of a college degree and graduates from a higher education institution. The completion rate, or graduation rate, is defined as “the percentage of a school’s first-time, first-year undergraduate students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the program” (Department of Education, n. d.). Therefore, a student that enrolls in a four-year degree program and finishes in six years would be counted in the 150% completion rate, because six years is 150% of four years. This rate is commonly measured at intervals of 100%, 150% and 200%, though 150% is the standard by which institutions compare completion rates with others. Although both definitions do not address nor account for students who continue their studies at a different institution, these are commonly used definitions.

The relationship between the retention and completion is natural and consequential. Natural because they both rely on students continuing their studies. Consequential because completion comes as the eventual consequence of continued retention. However, due to the time-bound nature of how completion rates are measured, completion infers a higher regard for the amount of time it takes the student to complete a degree, while retention is only concerned with continuance of a student’s academic pursuits.

Overview of Issues with Student Retention and Completion

Across the United States, but especially in open access institutions, degree completion rates continue to be of national concern (Kelderman, 2012; Selingo, 2012). According to one report, since 1983, college graduation rates for four-year degrees varied between 36% in 2013 to 52.8% in 1986 at all four-year, public institutions (ACT, 2014). The more concerning part of this data is the declining nature of the change. Per the same report (ACT, 2016) the graduation rate in 2016 was 36.6%. This means that approximately 64 out of every 100 students who begin college will not finish a degree within five years. Not only does the issue pervade every type of institution but every type of student is susceptible (Selingo, 2012).

While there are myriad interventional and remedial models for increasing student retention rates, higher education professionals still struggle to discover effective methods to reliably increase college completion rates (Selingo, 2012). Retention rates increased by 0.4% between 1993 and 2014 (ACT, 2014), while completion rates decreased by 2.1% according to the same report.

Another area of research in academic performance that has gained more notoriety and attention in recent years is that which is referred to as non-cognitive skills. This area of research has donned various monikers throughout the years some of which, like hardiness (Kobasa, 1979), were borrowed from other fields of research, such as psychology. While it can be argued that the name non-cognitive is a misnomer, as many of the skills associated with the non-cognitive field of study often require very cognitive processes, this growing movement has led to the study of concepts such as grit

(Duckworth, 2007), mindset (Dweck, 2006), persistence, perseverance, and resilience, among others.

According to the ACT data from 2016, the national retention rate was 68.5%. When this number is disaggregated into types of institutions, public institutions show a retention rate that drops to 56.4% at two-year institutions, and 64.9% at four-year institutions (ACT, 2016). Completion rates, however, tell a different story. The national completion rate was 47.1% on a five-year completion timeframe for bachelor level programs at four-year institutions (ACT, 2016). When disaggregated to public institutions, the three-year rate drops to 22.1% at two-year institutions, and the five-year rate to 36.6% at four-year institutions (ACT, 2016). Furthermore, the rate drops to 36% at open admissions institutions even when extended to a six-year completion window (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

In recent years, degree completion has become more and more the center of attention (Russell, 2011). According to one report, Russell underscores this movement towards completion by highlighting several programs, grants, initiatives, and research studies which took place or were under way during the years 2008-2011. Russell attributes much of this shift towards completion to the administration of President Barack Obama as it “explored new territory for the federal government in setting college completion goals” (p. 2).

Adequacy of Current Research

Even though studies have been conducted on groups of students as a whole (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1983), on students who participate in college

preparation programs (Watt, Huerta & Alkan, 2011; Gardner & Marszalek, 2014), as well as other groups, there is a paucity of literature and research regarding the group in the middle—the students who fall in the middle of the pack. Compounding the issue, the understanding of which aspects of college students are not prepared for, what they struggle with during their first year, what the sources of critical stress and pressure are have not been fully examined for the middle group of students. This is the result of the lack of research on the middle group.

However, because the nature of the differences between the students in the middle group is subtle, and the reasons for the differences varied, the traditional approach of investigation may not be adequate to the challenge. Traditional investigation seeks to examine outliers—extremes of some measure or another. For the most part, this type of extreme difference is rarely present in the middle group and so the necessary investigative approach must be adjusted to fit the group dynamics. The difference between one middle student and the next is difficult to discern.

Possible Areas of Influence on Student Choice

Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT)

Krumboltz (2009) describes HLT as a theory that:

. . . posits that human behavior is the product of countless numbers of learning experiences made available by both planned and unplanned situations in which individuals find themselves...The interaction of planned and unplanned actions in response to self-initiated and circumstantial situations is so complex that the consequences are virtually unpredictable and can best be labeled as happenstance.

The success of the participants in this study may all be a matter of happenstance. Understanding that even though the learning situations in which individuals find themselves may be measurable, not all outcomes are necessarily predictable.

Growth Mindset

Dweck (2006) refers to the growth mindset as the belief that one's outcome can be changed by deciding what it is that one desires, and working to make it a reality. In other words, the future outcomes of one's own life are malleable. This is another area that may be prominent among participants based on the understanding that something about them made them choose to continue when so many of their cohort did not.

Hope Theory

Snyder (2002) defines hope as the "perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways" (p. 249). Participants in this study are likely to believe they were in control of their own outcomes. However, it is not expected that they each consciously took control to form pathways to more positive outcomes.

Emerging Research

Watt, Powell, Mendiola & Cossio (2006) make mention of the impact of AVID as an intervention with middle-performing students indicating that an increase in performance of these students "can raise school-wide academic indicators" (p. 66), but do not discuss the middle group further. Another article revealed that at least one group of researchers at the Education Advisory Board (EAB) has begun to focus on the "murky middle" (Tyson, 2014, para. 2). EAB has collected student data from 110 four-year

colleges and universities in the nation. Their results indicated that, on a national level, the middle students may be on the cusp of becoming a more prominent part of retention and completion conversations.

Possible Reasons Students Leave or Stay in College

Tinto (1987) wrote that “grades were relatively unimportant in determining departure” (p. 28). Extant literature has predetermined categories or classes of information that apply generally to more generic groups of students (i.e. first generation, non-traditional, etc.). However, this leaves a gap of understanding for comprehending the texture within these wider classifications where individuals vary only slightly by academic measures, but greatly by the measure of the drivers of said academic measures. Because there is no easy way to approach an individualized methodological approach to serving the needs of all students, institutions may tend to allocate resources to address the needs of the students who have deficiencies that are more obvious.

Recognizing there are factors that contribute to the future success of an individual in completing a degree, such as an external source of motivation (Cejda & Stick, 2008), faculty attitudes and behaviors (Lundquist, Spalding & Landrum, 2003), demographic information (Nippert, 2001), and feeling a part of their campus community (Tinto, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012), it must also be acknowledged that a straightforward static approach to remediation may not be sufficient. Additionally, other researchers affirm the negative effects of the high school academic record of a student on college degree attainment (Jaffe & Adams, 1970, as cited in Nippert, 2001; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). This research suggested that high school performance affects college

completion, so if the high school experience were positive, it would have a positive effect on college completion. However, perhaps a more integral part of the high school experience is the behaviors developed, and interventional actions received by students. Experiences in these areas contribute to, or affect, college completion rates, as well. Data from a large, public, open admission institution in the Western United States shows that students from the middle third of their high school graduating class fail to complete at significantly lower rate when compared to their counterparts who graduated in the top third (Western United States University [WUSU], 2013). Students from the middle third of the high school graduating class who attend this institution struggle to successfully transition into college (WUSU, 2013).

The principal assumption of the present study is that current research findings cannot be adequately applied to the middle group. While middle students will reap some reward for interventions that are not specifically designed to meet their needs, the impact may be stifled because the intervention is not personalized. The middle group needs to be studied as a separate group.

Hurtado (2007) stated that “more research is needed to understand the conditions under which historically underrepresented students fare best...” (p. 188). This statement supports the idea that understanding students on a more granular level is requisite for understanding the conditions under which they would thrive. In other words, if we study students as individuals, the more we may understand them as individuals.

Conclusion

More understanding of the difference between low-, middle-, and high-performing students beyond academic measures is needed. The existing literature focuses on categorizing people into groups by traits including, but not limited to, gender, race, income status, and educational attainment level of the parents. This approach, however, can stifle the voice of the individual within those groups. Very little research was found regarding the lived experiences of middle-performing students and their journey towards degree completion. Therefore, the purpose of this critical incident study is to gain understanding of how students see the pivotal moments in their academic careers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Qualitative Inquiry

In order to address the aforementioned research questions, and to address the purpose of this study, a qualitative study was conducted, using a phenomenological approach by interviewing seven recent graduates from a large, open access institution in the Western United States. A qualitative approach is useful to begin to deepen one's understanding of areas in which differences are harder to discern. Parse (2001) states that, contrary to empirical or quantitative approaches, qualitative inquiry focuses more on "human experiences as unitary and ever-changing [in which] absolute truths are not sought" (p. 1). Parse (2001) supports the idea that qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the lived experiences of the subjects through their individual lenses of understanding. This emphasizes the need for careful interpretation of data that does not shroud the individual lived experiences with overly specific findings. Rather the interpretation should simply add to the conversation and seek to advance learning and inquiry along similar lines of research (Parse, 2001).

Creswell (2013) states that the qualitative research approach selected heavily influence the overall outcome of a project. I believed it was important to take time to examine the difference among approaches, and also, to ponder the desired outcome of the present study. Creswell describes phenomenological research as a narrative study that "reports the stories of experiences of a single individual or several individuals [which

describe] the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Critical Incident Technique

In order to address research questions, a qualitative study was conducted, using a phenomenological approach by interviewing seven recent graduates from a large open access institution in the Western United States. Then the interviews were analyzed employing the critical incident technique.

Overview

Flanagan (1954) described the critical incident technique (CIT) as a “set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles” (n. p.). An incident must be an “observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made” (Flanagan, 1954, n. p.). An incident qualifies as critical if it is an incident that the observer can clearly discern and one that incident produces “consequences [that] are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects” (Flanagan, 1954, n. p.).

Flanagan (1954) examined reasons for failure in different scenarios dealing with military aviation. In the present study, I sought to identify reasons for success, not failure. However, a point of caution is issued by Flanagan; he reported that in many instances interviewees in his studies “did not provide a complete record of all the important events” (1954, n. p.). The findings of this research study cannot be taken to broad application without expanding the sample size, preferably through purposeful

sampling methods to further identify participants whose experiences will contribute meaningful findings (Creswell, 2013).

Use of CIT in Higher Education Research

One limitation of CIT methodology in this study is that it relies on the persistent behaviors or behavioral patterns of the subjects in a given controlled circumstance (Flanagan, 1954, n. p.). Since there was not one given circumstance which was the same for all the students observed in this study, establishing a persistent pattern was difficult. In order to offset this dilemma, the analysis required a focus on the behavioral pattern irrespective of circumstances.

Despite this potential limitation, other researchers have used CIT in the research of higher education (Douglas, McClelland, Davies & Sudbury, 2009; Khandelwal, 2009; Vianden, 2012). In the three publications just referenced, CIT is used to inform educational practices and theories. This makes it an ideal framework to implement in higher education where practicality is prized just as well as sound theory.

Critical Experiences in this Study

The purpose of this study is to produce greater understanding regarding the kinds of decisions middle students are confronted with regarding persistence and graduation. The findings focus on the overall experience rather than the individual who experienced it. One of the advantages of using CIT is the inherent focus on the incident and not the actors involved in the incident. CIT emphasizes the use of a “set of procedures for analyzing and synthesizing such observations into a number of relationships that can be tested by making additional observations under more carefully controlled conditions”

(Flanagan, 1954, n. p.). In other words, the purpose of CIT is to systematically produce observed relationships for future retesting. This process forces the researcher to focus on the commonalities among the observed, shared accomplishment each which, in this case, is degree completion.

Data Collection

Approval

Approval for the present study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A) prior to proceeding, and since participant selection criteria and contact information was housed on another institution's database servers, a second approval was obtained from the second institution's IRB (Appendix B). Approval was granted for the use of email and phone contact to recruit potential participants. The researcher had taught at the institution, and there existed the possibility existed for coercion. Therefore, the second institution contacted the potential participants and only provided contact information to the researcher for those who agreed to participate.

Sampling

The institution selected reflected the natural demographics of the student body population. It is an open access institution granting one-year certificates, two- and four-year undergraduate degrees, as well as graduate degrees. This makes it an institution that attracts a wide range of students, and it allowed more opportunities to attend the institution and participate in the research. This means that it attracted a group of students who will become a group of potential completers and non-completers that was representative of the wider community it served.

The sampling plan was created and then altered. Initial sampling estimations with the Institutional Research and Information office (IRI) at this institution employed (a) the parameters of high school rank upon admission to the institution, (b) GPA below a 2.0 during at least one semester during the first year, (c) Pell Grant eligibility at some point during their college years, and (d) graduation within six years of their entering cohort year of 2006-2007. This set of parameters produced zero potential participants. One of the main reasons identified by IRI was that students who earn such a low GPA during their first year in school generally do not complete a degree at this institution.

Consequently, the pool was widened in five ways.

1. Included GPAs ranging between 2.0-3.2 from HS estimated by IRI to represent the middle third;
2. Changed the entering cohort year to include those who had graduated from the 2008-2009 school year within four years;
3. Extended the cohort start year backwards to include any student for whom reliable data had been collected, the earliest start being from the year 1992;
4. Removed the requirement of earning below a 2.0 GPA;
5. Removed Pell Grant eligibility.

Converting the middle third ranking to a middle range of GPAs was seen as an adequate adjustment to the strategy because certain issues with the data would be ameliorated. IRI described the data from previous cohort years as “fuzzy,” meaning that the data became less reliable and less consistent. One of the issues contributing to the “fuzziness” of the data was that only some high school transcripts included high school

rankings. Additionally, it was discovered that during some years, high school ranking was reported as a percentile rank and other years as the actual rank within the high school graduating class. Since no information was available on the size of the actual graduating class, percentile rank could not be ascertained for the latter group of transcripts.

The rationale to include the more recent cohort years was a simple correction in initial approach. As the request was written to IRI, the stated cohort year was 2006-2007. If only this cohort was included, the group would be limited to only those students who graduated *at* the 6-year graduation mark, and not those who graduated sooner.

Likewise, the decisions to remove the requirement for earning below a 2.0 GPA at least once during the first year in college, to remove Pell Grant eligibility were made to increase the potential pool of applicants.

This new set of parameters produced 73 potential participants. The protocol for contacting potential participants was adjusted to include a letter sent out at the expense of the researcher in addition to the email sent by IRI. This added step would increase the number of individuals actually receiving the invitation to participate and, therefore, potentially increase the number of individuals opting into the study.

Additionally, permission was obtained to financially incentivize participation. Participants were offered remuneration for participating in the interview, and approving the transcription of the interview. This new approach produced a sufficient pool of participants all of whom completed the interview process.

Procedures

Participants were invited to participate in semi-structured, in-person interviews at times and locations that were convenient for the participants. One participated via Skype, and the remainder took part in on-campus, face-to-face interviews. Interviews began in March 2014 and were completed by the middle of May 2014. Each participant was assigned a research pseudonym to protect his or her identity. The document containing pseudonym assignment is in a password-protected file, on a password-protected computer.

The researcher conducted all interviews. An interview protocol (Appendix C) was used to facilitate discussion and to capture information relevant to each of the research questions. Adhering to a systematic process of data collection is required by CIT (Flanagan, 1954). Use of the interview protocol allowed for greater consistency in the amount and type of data collected from the participants.

Data Recording

All interviews were recorded either using digital audio recorders, audio recording software on a PC, webcam or a combination of these. Apart from the Skype participant, all recordings only had a minimal number of inaudible sections. The Skype interview was recorded with multiple digital audio recorders. While no single recording was complete, together they provided a complete interview. During one interview the principal recording device lost power, which resulted in an incomplete recording. This accounted for a negligible amount of recording loss. Upon discovering the malfunction,

the researcher took notes to help guide the conversation, but not so much that it disrupted the interview or damaged the relationship established with the participant.

Data Analysis and Validity

Transcription

From June 2014 through December 2014, the process of transcription took place. At first transcribing took approximately four hours to complete 15 minutes of interview. With approximately seven hours of interviews to transcribe, the requisite 112 hours of transcription was daunting. Almost all the remaining interview time was done using speech recognition software with the researcher listening on earphones, and speaking into a microphone to transcribe. It was discovered that the software was not transcribing accurately enough to rely upon the transcriptions. So, a review of all the interviews was required to correct mistakes. In the end, the total transcription time was approximately 60 hours.

Marginal Notes

As the transcription took place, it was natural to make notes and observations at the same time. Memoing is a technique of analysis (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001) that employs the practice of making notes beginning with more open, and non-specific material. Grouping those into larger affinity groups then occurs (Trochim, 2006). Memoing was utilized as an analytic tool to identify emerging themes and to provide validation for the research findings.

Coding and Theme Development

With the transcriptions complete, they were imported into MaxQDA. This software facilitates the process of coding. Coding is a process by which theme labels are applied to segments of the written transcription as it is reviewed. By coding in MaxQDA, the ability to identify emerging themes and summarize code frequencies is greatly enhanced. The frequency reporting function was used to identify the most prevalent themes and to identify themes which could potentially be grouped under broader labels.

Member-checked

The transcriptions were sent to each participant, along with a private link to the uploaded audio or video file of the interview. Audio recordings were uploaded to Dropbox, and video recordings to YouTube. All files were destroyed after participants were given the opportunity to review the transcription. A copy of the emails sent to inform participants of their rights to review, and to accept or reject the transcription is provided (Appendix D).

Ethical Considerations

As mentioned previously, special care and attention for the privacy and potential conflicts was given at every step. Ethical treatment of the participants and their personal experiences began with IRB approval, indirect recruitment of participants, and providing them anonymity with a pseudonym. Additionally, the compensation was mailed via United States Postal Service Certified Mail to limit the amount of sensitive and personal information passed along. Additionally, verbal instruction was given to each participant

that if he or she believed the researcher to be incorrectly interpreting their interview responses, they should speak up. At every turn, care and sensitivity for the privacy and comfort needs was afforded. This allowed participants to speak more openly about each incident.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study was performed to identify common themes in the lived experiences of graduates for a large, open access university in the Western United States. These graduates were middle-performers in high school, as previously defined, and at said institution have a much lower probability of graduating from college than one would expect. The intention of this study was to identify commonalities that could inform administrative decisions regarding practices related to retention and persistence.

Seven interviews produced 301 instances of recalling impactful events or activities that painted an emerging picture of the collective lived experiences of the aforementioned students at this university. Of these 301 experiences, 228 occurred after the participants had begun going to college, as is reflected in Figure 4.1, but did not necessarily occur as a deliberate part of college. The two most common categories with which participant experiences aligned and occurred during college were under the major themes of personal habits and backstories of participants, and participation in some major academic activity, such as an internship. These two themes accounted for 106 of the 228, or 46.5% of experiences shared and are depicted in Figure 4.2.

Of the 73 experiences that occurred prior to beginning college, the two most common themes were in the areas of (a) identifying a person of direct or indirect influence, and (b) personal habits or backstories that contributed to the participants' habits or beliefs regarding education. These two themes accounted for 51 of the 73, or 69.9% of experiences shared as shown in Figure 4.3.

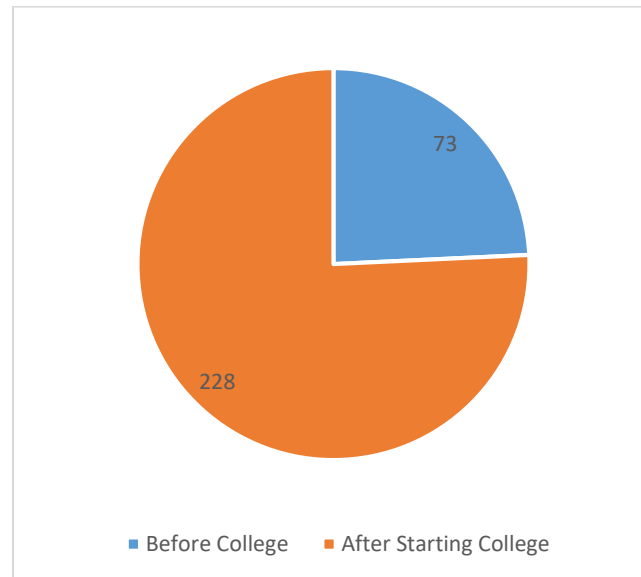


Figure 4.1. Number of experiences shared during data collection

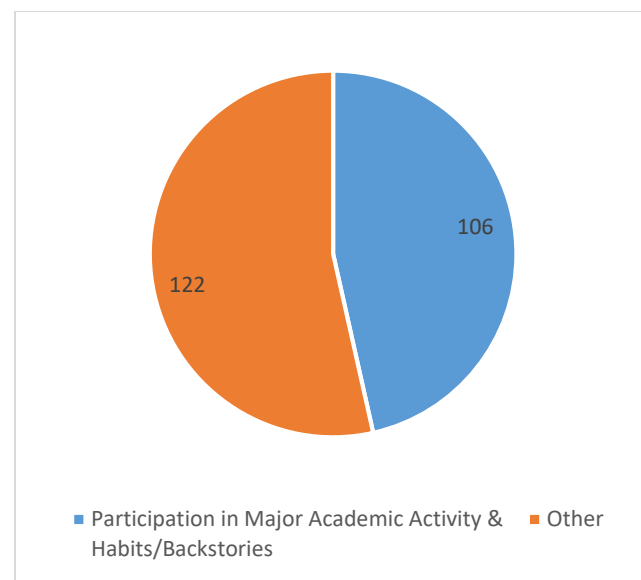


Figure 4.2. Number of experiences shared which occurred after starting college

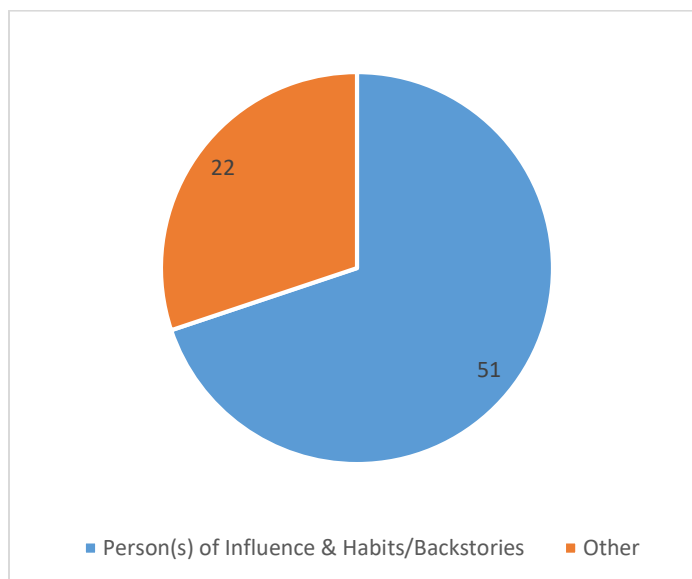


Figure 4.3. Number of experiences shared which occurred before starting college

Of all the experiences shared during college, there were only two themes that all participants mentioned. The first of these was “person(s) of direct influence during college.” This theme accounted for 29 of 228, or 12.7% of experiences as shown in Figure 4.4. Participants mentioned an additional 14 experiences with people who had an indirect influence on them, such as an engaging professor who did not necessarily interact with the participant individually, but rather with the class as a whole. Not all of these persons of influence were from the institution of higher education the participants attended.

The second of these themes was “the need to work to earn money.” This theme accounted for 19 of 228, but when you include the mention of financial concerns not in direct relation to the need to work that total increases to 38 of 228, or 16.7%, also shown in Figure 4.4.

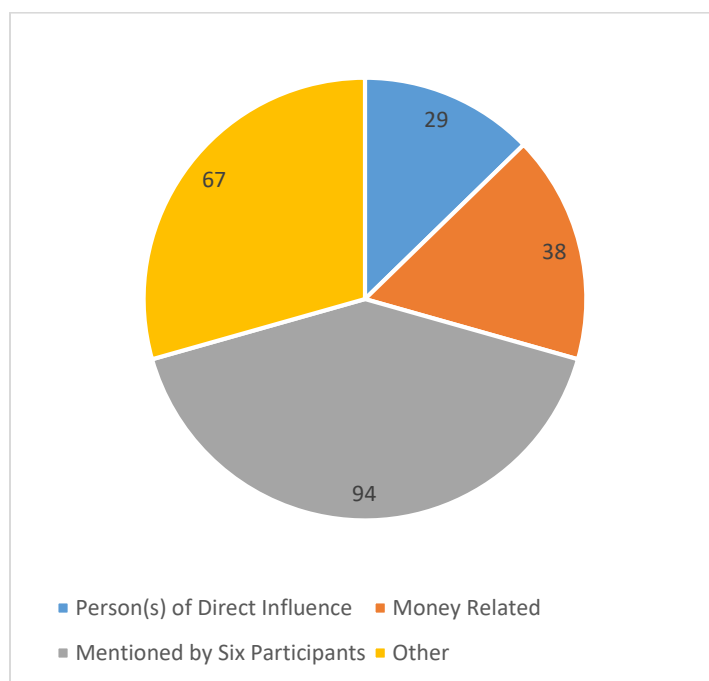


Figure 4.4. Themes common to all participants after starting college.

Six of the seven participants mentioned several other themes. These were (a) major academic activities while in college (i.e. internships, honors program participation, etc.), (b) academic events while in college (i.e. recognitions, graduation, etc.), (c) personal habits and backstory while in college (i.e. personal recognition of habits, taking corrective action with personal habits, etc.), and (d) life events during college (i.e. death or illness in the family, enlisting in military or religious service, etc.). Together these accounted for 94 of 228, or 41.2% of all experiences that occurred after participants began going to college, and are also depicted in Figure 4.4.

All participants had received a Bachelor's degree. One had obtained multiple Bachelor's degrees. One had obtained a Master's degree. One was planning on graduate work but had not yet commenced. All were employed at the time of the interview. All

attributed at least part of their current living circumstances to their time in college. All expressed that college was not the primary source of influence in their careers, but that experiences they had during college were life changing.

Participant Profiles

In this section, I provide a personal profile of each participant, with highlights. The information they shared, and that which was observed during the interview, is summarized for each participant to provide a backdrop for the citations and experiences that were shared as a part of the evidence presented in this study. While all the information gathered was summarized, I did not assume that these profiles are complete as it is not likely that each participant shared a full picture of who they were individually during the interview. As such, these profiles are intended only to add context to the understanding of the citations that will be shared.

Alex

Alex is a Caucasian male in his mid-thirties. He is married, born, raised and currently resides in the Western United States. At the time of the interview he was gainfully employed. He has a twin brother, and at least one older sibling. As a teenager, he was admittedly not highly engaged in high school. As a young man, but after having earned an Associate's degree, he chose to leave for two years to serve a religious mission for his church in Portugal, where he realized that it was to his advantage to be a little older than most of the other missionaries because he had already learned to deal with obstacles and pressure to perform.

Upon returning from his religious mission, he earned multiple undergraduate degrees ultimately earning two Associate's degrees, and two Bachelor's degrees. His Associate's degrees were in General Studies and Graphic Design. His Bachelor's degrees were in Visual Arts and Behavioral Science. While in pursuit of these degrees, he suffered major depressive episodes requiring hospitalization. For that, and other reasons, he stopped out multiple times throughout his college career. Alex is highly driven by own needs and beliefs. He does not easily succumb to following the crowd.

Alex worked on campus as a student and met his wife-to-be while still in college. He worked during most of his time in college and while in pursuit of each of his four degrees.

Heidi

Heidi is a Caucasian female in her late twenties. She is married, and was born and raised in the Western United States. At the time of the interview, she was employed and living in the Western United States.

She was homeschooled through an out-of-state, correspondence program, but she spent some time in a traditional high school to finish the requirements for her diploma. Heidi enjoyed the performing arts in high school and continued her participation in college.

After starting her second year in college, and amidst a change in her major, she lost a loved one to cancer. Shortly thereafter she decided to serve a religious mission for 18 months. Upon her return, she threw herself headlong into her studies with a determination she had not experienced prior to her father passing away, and her

missionary service. She eventually earned a Bachelor's degree in English. At the time of the interview, she reported to have just completed a Master's degree in English as well.

While in school, Heidi worked almost continuously while enrolled. She worked on campus in various departments and attributes much of passion she discovered upon her return to school to her work involvement on campus. She became determined to help others have a better experience than she had.

James

James is a Caucasian male in his late thirties. He was born and raised in the Western United States and has at least one older sibling. At the time of the interview he was married with children, employed full-time, and living in the Western United States.

He reported that his grades in high school were poor enough that his parents worried going to college at all. He decided to serve a religious mission for two years and, upon return, went to college. After a short time, he met his wife-to-be and got married, while still working and attending classes.

James joined the military late in 2001, and due to his military involvement experienced multiple stop-outs from his college career. At the time, he already had two children. He worked while in school to support his family. Because of his military service, he enjoyed the education benefits of the GI Bill, and still actively serves in the Army Reserves.

He has earned two Associate's degrees, earning one in the language he studied in the military as a linguist. He also completed a Bachelor's degree in Business Management and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Information Security.

Johnathan

Johnathan is a Caucasian male in his late twenties. He was born and raised in the Western United States, and at the time of the interview lived in the Western United States, was unmarried, and had recently undergone a career change, but was employed full-time. Johnathan expressed a deep appreciation for the practice of yoga and physical health, in general, at one point calling himself a “gym rat.” He arrived late to the interview appointment, out of breath, because he had just come from a yoga practice and had a deep conversation with his instructor following the class.

At a very young age he learned the value of work and participated every year in family businesses. He also learned the value of enjoying work. In high school, he enrolled in many concurrent enrollment courses, which are courses taken in high school but offer college credit. His older brother heavily influenced his college major.

After a couple years of college, he worked at an internship at a family-owned business of which his father was a co-founder. He worked while in college. Johnathan earned a Bachelor’s degree in Accounting.

Margaret

Margaret is a Caucasian female in her late twenties, born and raised in the Western United States, and has multiple older siblings. At the time of the interview, she was single, employed full-time and living in the Western United States. She was also taking college classes in Computer Science as they are related to her position at work. She was utilizing the tuition reimbursement program offered by her employer.

In her younger years, she was diagnosed with a learning disability, and experienced difficulty in junior high and high school. She attended a junior college where she excelled and earned an Associate's degree, graduating Summa Cum Laude, before transferring to a four-year degree granting institution.

The transfer experience was not smooth, and, thus she was forced to work full-time to support herself and to provide assistance to her ailing mother. She worked in some capacity throughout her college career in both on- and off-campus organizations.

Thomas

Thomas is a Caucasian male in his early thirties from Texas. At the time of the interview he was married, employed full-time and living in Texas.

As a young man in high school, he was not highly engaged in academics, though he participated heavily in athletics. After a short time at a two-year junior college, he elected to serve a religious mission for two years. Upon his return he continued his studies at the junior college until he decided to transfer to an out-of-state institution in an area where he had multiple hometown friends. After he transferred and paid out-of-state tuition for one year, he took two years off from school to gain in-state residency status and the ability to pay a much lower tuition rate. He completed multiple internships and experienced multiple stop-outs from his studies. He worked throughout his time in college.

Thomas married while in school but did not have children until after graduating. His mother went to college, but not his father. Thomas earned his

Bachelor's degree in Technology Management with an emphasis in Construction Management.

Vanessa

Vanessa, an Asian-American female in her mid-twenties, was born and raised in the Western United States. At the time of the interview she was a divorced, single woman, was employed full-time, and was living in the Western United States. She did not have children.

She stated that she “was not serious about high school” but still graduated early from high school and began college when she was 17. Both of her parents held advanced degrees and were employed full-time. Vanessa completed at least two education-related work experiences while in college, though they were not classified as internships. She experienced multiple changes in her major.

She did not have to work during college because her parents were paying for everything. When she was married during college, her husband earned a good income that allowed her to continue her studies without the need for work. She graduated with a Bachelor's in Hospitality Management and then moved to Washington D.C. to be with her husband who had moved there for work while she finished her degree. Following her divorce, she returned to the Western United States and began law school shortly thereafter. At the time of the interview, she had recently dropped out of law school stating that she was not happy and was overly stressed.

All participants

Participants shared one commonality. None of the participants completed their four-year degree in four years. Most required between six to eight years, with one participant taking almost 16 years, though the time in college was often interrupted.

Emerging Themes and Patterns

Discussed in this section are the nature of the incidents participants described and the commonalities between them. These commonalities fall into the following themes: (a) needs expressed through the experiences, (b) type and nature of participant experiences, (c) common participant traits displayed during these experiences, and (d) the short- and long-term effects of these decisions and experiences, as shown in Figure 4.5.

These themes are examined to understand the implications for application within educational institutions. Each of the four themes to be discussed is accompanied by a section providing excerpts from the participant interviews that provide evidence for these themes. Some of the experiences shared occurred while in high school, and while the present study will not delve deeply into these occurrences they nonetheless exert influence on collegiate experiences. Discussion of these experiences will be presented in a way that shows the impact each had while the participant was in college.

Basic Needs

Before exploring each of the preceding areas, it is useful to understand the two fundamental needs and obstacles for students to pursue an education beyond high school. The collective experiences of the participants provide a backdrop for a more simplified

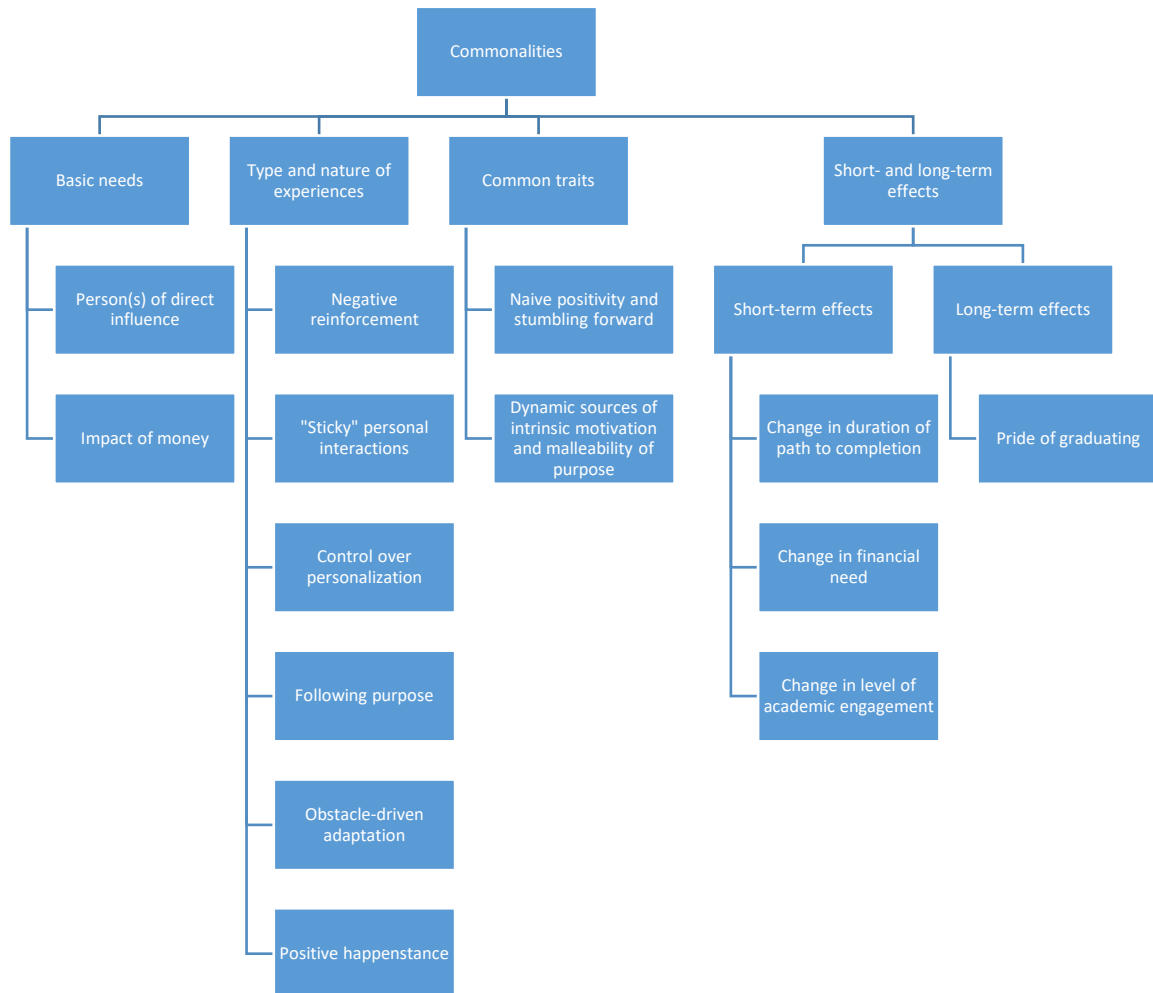


Figure 4.5. Chart of commonalities and needs.

way to understand the basic needs of middle-performing students. The first two basic needs were (a) “person(s) of direct influence” and (b) “the need to work to earn money”, and were mentioned by all participants. There is also another subtheme that was not produced deliberately during the coding process. This subtheme is related to the impact

that work and money have on decision-making processes of college students. It has to do with the purpose and personalization of educational endeavors and has been titled “personalized, meaningful learning.”

As participants engaged in money-related activities, like work, or scholarship pursuits, their actual time for studying was affected. Additionally, their mental availability and willingness were also affected by such work- and money-related activities.

Person(s) of Direct Influence

Alex, in a conversation with his parents about his desire to earn a two-year degree before leaving for a two-year religious mission recalled that, “I think my parents were thinking about my high school performance, [and] they were like ‘Great! At least you would have something.’” Alex had not been the best student in high school, and, while what Alex shared of this experience only touched briefly on college needs, it exemplified the interest his parents had in his education, and his need to communicate with them concerning this topic.

Heidi shared an experience she had with her father when he was dying of cancer. This experience played a major role in how she pursued an education.

In the hospital, the night before he died when he said “Go. Go finish your final. It’ll be okay. Go finish your final.” I think that moment helped make the decision. And I made that decision because I knew it was not only beneficial for me but it was something my dad wanted to do.

Heidi mentioned this same experience several times throughout the interview.

James, in reflecting on the influence his wife and children had on his college experience said, “my perspective was that I needed to show them that some things were

worth sacrificing for, and I felt like college was one of those things.” He also shared a high school experience that changed his perspective about himself.

I had some teachers towards the end of high school that made a big impact on me, that definitely gave me confidence that I, for most of my school years, didn't have. My teacher...just really encouraged me. I was in my senior year. I tried to get out of the [math] class so I could go get shop aide or something like that because I wanted to have fun like my friends were having fun, and he wouldn't sign the slip to check me out. [He] called my mom and told her that I needed to be in the class and had real gift for it. And whether any of that was true or not, it made a huge impact for me. I felt like I could do something, and it was nice to have somebody have some confidence in my ability to do this...[He] saw...some intelligence in me. So, that made a big difference.

Jonathan's experience in high school influenced his decisions in college. Regarding his reasons for selecting a major, he recalled, “Mostly it was because my brother would tell me how valuable and needed accountants are in every business.” At the time of this experience, his brother was in college and he had been taking an accounting class. Jonathan referred to this experience a few times throughout the interview.

Margaret became acquainted with a previously unknown relative during her first semester in college. This individual would have a major influence on how Margaret engaged in college.

She was the Dean of Humanities, but she was also an advisor for Phi Theta Kappa. So, when I got the letter that I could join [Phi Theta Kappa], it had her name on it. And so, I showed my parents – because it's always exciting to show good things instead of bad report cards. My dad read the name and he was like, “Oh! Doreen Martha Sorenson!” “Ya! She teaches the Convocations class, and she's the advisor.” He kept on saying the name...And he was like “Well that's my cousin.” So, after a Convocation [class], I turned in...my [note] card and said “Oh, by the way, Uncle Peter and Cousin Jordan say ‘Hi.’” And she said “Oh! And who are you?” “Well, I'm Jordan's daughter.” The next school year, she said “Hey, we got some more money. I can hire an assistant [for Phi Theta Kappa], and I'd like you to apply for the job.”

Margaret shared experiences about high school that reflected her uncomfortableness with the learning environment there. This connection experience on a college campus noticeably impacted how she felt about her sense of belonging in a college setting.

Thomas shared an experience that influenced his decision to change his major. After completing a year of school as a Graphic Design major at a community college near his hometown, he moved out-of-state from his home in Texas. Due to the higher cost of attending college as an out-of-state student, he chose to work while he gained residency status. Speaking of how he found the job that would influence his decision to change majors Thomas reflected, “[A] friend of mine was working there, and he got me a job at the restoration company.” This was a simple interaction, but was an event Thomas recalled as being very impactful to his decision to continue his studies.

Vanessa shared a different take on her view of those who influenced her to continue with her college studies. She stated,

I wish I could say ‘Oh, there was this one person that influenced me to keep on going through college, and graduate, and have a pretty okay GPA, and all of that.’ But, really it’s more like a ‘well, that’s just what you do.’ And, I guess it’s the way I was raised.

Earlier in the conversation she referred to college as “just something that you do” because of the example and expectations of her parents.

The Impact of Money

Another area of common need was the need for money – either in the present or in the future. The participants often referred to work as a necessity or as an influencer on how dedicated they found themselves to be with their studies. This need for money

affected two major areas: (a) the purpose for which participants continued college and (b) the level of immediate application they sought in the coursework they chose.

Alex said:

Because I had that Graphic Design Associate's degree, I was able to get better paying jobs than most others were getting. I was getting paid \$10-\$11 an hour while they were all getting paid whatever the minimum wage was at the time. And so it was a lot easier to maintain finances. I didn't have to take a takeout as much student debt.

While Alex experienced less money-related stress, he still emphasized how the need for money influenced his time during school. He also related how it influenced his work with individuals seeking welfare assistance. He would tell them to "go for the Associate's degree, and break up your college thing into little goals along the way...[be]cause you never know what's going to happen."

Heidi had auditioned for a performing arts scholarship before her freshman year, but she was not awarded it, she recalled:

It actually got me thinking about getting a job, because once I figured I wasn't going to get the scholarship I realized I was going to have to find another way to pay for it. And my parents are middle class so that wasn't going to come from them. And so short-term that got me into actually two jobs, actually a third when I was working with my dad on a couple projects he was doing at work.

Heidi was not able to dedicate all of her time to school because of her financial need. Later she remarked about an on-campus job saying:

I started working at the testing center. My whole day was on campus. Between classes and working, and then, again I worked in financial aid the year after that, and that just kept me here. It kept me on the campus, and I think that that really helped contribute to a motivation to just keep coming back.

In this instance, Heidi affirmed that her desire to continue with her educational pursuits was directly impacted by the work she enjoyed.

James joined the military in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks. He said he joined because of an *esprit de corps* and patriotism; he later came to realize the educational benefits his service provided. He recalled, “When I got back from Afghanistan, there was a G.I. deal that was available so that was a lot more educational assistance at that point.” Later he remarked, “I definitely was really happy later when I found out all the benefits that came along with [my military service], and it certainly made it easier to finish [college] than having to allocate money towards school.”

Johnathan reported a more focused approach to his education. Regarding how he chose classes, and how many to take, he referenced “a combination of scheduling and best professor for the subject,” that his “schedule was very important,” and stated that in one class he “kind of dropped off” because he “already had the grade [he] wanted.” His attitude towards his education was one that emphasized personal gain or interest, and not simply a good grade in a class. He often worked while attending school. Simply put, he said, “I had other priorities, demands, working part-time.”

Margaret mentioned the need for money on many occasions throughout the interview. In one instance, she was seeking part-time work so she could attend school full-time. However, she only got one call back from an employer offering full-time work. When reflecting on the impact of needing to work full-time while attending school part-time she remarked that “I wouldn’t say that it negatively impacted [me]. It just took longer.”

Thomas, an out-of-state student after leaving his hometown, had experiences with non-resident tuition rates. He recalled, “When I first started there they required two years

living in the state to become a resident. So, I didn't want to pay out of state tuition, so I took two years off. So, those things kind of pushed me a little bit away from school."

Vanessa had wealthy parents who paid for her schooling. She said that she focused a lot on being "both happy and successful" because she "grew up with two parents who really loved their jobs...and get paid well for what they do. So, I think I just wasn't willing to back down on the idea of both [happiness and success]." She recalled:

One of the main factors that made me decide to not go to law school was that I married somebody who made a lot of money. So, at that time it was just happiness based. Like, 'Oh, I think I could be happy being a psychologist, Or I think I could be happy being a hotel and restaurant manager.' And money no longer had like any driving factor for me.

She spent the ensuing years trying to discover what she was truly passionate about doing, but also where she could earn the money she needed. The changes in her major reflected the effect that the alleviation of money worries had on how she viewed educational pursuits.

Summary of Basic Needs

Every student who participated in this study had basic needs which, if unfulfilled, became obstacles. Summarized into two categories, these basic needs are as follows:

1. Person(s) of direct influence
2. The impact of money

A person of direct influence is a person perceived by the participant to have had a lasting influence on their decision-making processes that lead them to continue the pursuit of a college degree.

The commonality of the impact of financial need is important. Every participant talked about the need for money either to live and support themselves or to pay for tuition and other school-related expenses. The need for money often interrupted, interfered, or impeded the progress of the participants towards graduation. The work involved in fulfilling this need also often exerted influence on how each participant viewed their major or their education as a whole, which in turn influenced the level of engagement in coursework or in school as a whole. It is difficult to determine whether the need for money was the catalyst for self-discovery or was an outcome of the attitudinal status of the student concerning education. Sometimes the employment, internships or scholarship application processes pushed the participants to explore career options and to assess their perceived fit in those careers. Other times because the attitude of the participant towards getting straight A's in school or to provide financial support for themselves or their family was such that they didn't feel the need to spend every spare moment studying and so dedicated themselves to other endeavors, often in employment. Regardless of where the common need for money resides in the spectrum of decision-making processes, the need was consistently expressed among participants and was related to the level of personalization of their purpose and motivation, and of the type of education each chose to pursue.

Type and Nature of Experiences

In addition to the common needs theme expressed throughout the interviews, there were also commonalities in the type and nature of the experiences themselves. The

type and nature of the experiences are not in direct relation to the topic of the experiences as is the case with the common needs. In this section six commonalities will be explored.

Negative Reinforcement

In an experience, Alex disclosed the feeling that he knew his parents were not well-pleased with his academic performance in high school. They expected more from him.

Heidi had an experience in high school with her assigned school counselor. Her feelings regarding this interaction are reflected in the following statement:

I had a high school counselor because I was transferring from this kind of different secondary school in Illinois, but it was also kind of private, you know. The high school counselor said “We’ve never accepted these credits. You’re not going to graduate,” sort of thing, and as soon as he said that something in my mind went (snaps) “No! I’m going to graduate, and you’re going to watch me.”

When Heidi knew how her high school counselor thought about her, she resisted the implication that she would not graduate and became more determined to do so.

James shared what he remembered of his conversations with his father while in high school:

[M]y dad...didn’t get a degree. He spent his whole career in a job that he didn’t like. And he often would tell us that we needed to do things necessary to finish [school] so that we could have more options. [M]ost of our conversations started because I wasn’t getting very good grades in high school, and he was afraid I wasn’t going to be able to get into college. So, he would stress that a lot at the time. It was something that I just remembered.

While Johnathan did not share any negative experiences about his time in high school or college, there was a consistent theme of only seeking activities and careers that

brought him happiness. Implicit in these experiences was his apparent overarching desire to avoid negative experiences.

When recounting her poor writing ability in the eighth grade, Margaret quipped, “Being dyslexic probably had something to do with that.” However, when reflecting on how it affected her in college, the negative nature of the diagnosis influenced her decision to prove to herself and others that she could do much better, despite the challenge:

There [were] some classes that I shied away from because I thought I would be at a disadvantage. [My] sister-in-law told me, ‘You know you’ll probably get special scholarships for being dyslexic.’ I was really ticked off about that because I don’t like the idea of having a disability.

As she recalled her childhood interactions with her siblings she noted, “I don’t know how much they would say that they knew that their sister had dyslexia. Some of them would just say that their sister was dumb.” Later she added, “not all of my siblings finished school and so I wanted to outdo them. And the nice thing is in college my GPA was higher than theirs. So, maybe some sibling rivalry going on there.” Her academic challenges and her experience with being labeled dumb seemed to fuel the wherewithal to keep pursuing a college education, and to find new ways to succeed.

Thomas responded to inevitable negative experiences in college that set the tone for how he would handle graduating in Construction Management in the 2009 economy. Construction jobs were scarce and were given to those with more years of experience than new graduates. In order to stem the inevitable hard times that awaited him, he followed the lead of some friends who were studying construction at a different institution.

I heard someone mention [internships] here and there. [My institution] didn't require them at the time with my degree, and I knew that [a neighboring institution] required you to do an internship with Construction Management. I made the decision to search out companies. I cold-called hundreds of companies. I looked through the top 400 companies in the United States, and got all their contact information together in a spreadsheet. I put together everything. I went company by company by company...I got two internships with one company, and they were in the top 100. And then I did an internship with a top 10 company out in California...I didn't realize the impact. I was just trying to get summer work and make as much money as I could...I probably didn't realize the full extent of how that was going to benefit me in the future.

Earlier in the interview he had related his experience following graduation recounting, "I started out...unemployed for a year. That was probably one of the roughest years because we had to live with...my wife's parents, my parents for a little bit...and I probably submitted...1500 resumes in that time span... I finally got a job in Houston working for a...contractor, doing project management for him." However, he didn't realize how much the experience of looking for internships and submitting an inordinate number of resumes would eventually conflate into a benefit for him and his family.

It still helps me to this day...I have people I have contacted on that list that have companies in Houston. One guy offered me an internship, and I was at school. I turned it down to work with the company in California, but I still keep in contact with him today, and that's actually how I got the job at the contracting company when I got out of school...I contacted him and he didn't have a position available. But he was on the board of the Houston Contractor's Association with the boss of the company where I did work...I'd send him an email every six months...drop in and just say 'hi'...that really actually helped me get my current job...When I got laid off, the owner of the company that laid me off gave me contact information for this other company, and I didn't end up going to that one. I went to another company on the supply side, and the owner of this company was on the board with the previous owner...He called him up and gave me a good recommendation. That's how I got hired at my current job.

Because of Thomas' response to the negative situation of not having internship resources available at his institution during the downturn in the economy, his career benefitted in the long run.

Vanessa had multiple negative experiences two of which involved on-the-job learning experiences. One experience while interning for a Culinary Arts degree at a local restaurant greatly affected her college pursuits. Of this experience, she recalled the following:

I realized that I really didn't want to be a chef anymore. I didn't like the hours; I didn't like the environment and the person who...was the chef of the company was someone who is on a local TV show, and I had watched the show over and over for pretty much my entire life. And she was a completely different person...So I decided not to be a culinary student anymore and to be an English major, and then I ended up rerouting towards the very end and graduating in Hotel and Restaurant Management. So, I think...seeing the social aspect of restaurants really changed my outlook on what side of [the] restaurant, at least, I wanted to do...Now, I'm a hotel manager. So, I'm still in the field but I'm definitely not in the back house somewhere.

Even though she had experienced very a negative situation with this internship, she ultimately decided to return to the same industry. However, the second time it was with more experience and self-awareness brought about by the negative experience.

“Sticky” Personal Interactions

Personal interactions that are sticky are those that are memorable, but were generally unintended and fleeting in nature. Despite the lack of purposeful interaction, these important interactions carry a long-lasting weight with these students.

Alex recalled this experience about his religious mission. He related this to the reaction his parents had when discussing this religious rite of passage which normally occurs at age 19 for young men of his religious beliefs.

My parents weren't pushing too much because they didn't want to have three missionaries out at once. And then I explained, well I can go ahead and finish up this Associates degree before my mission...I delayed going on a mission for six months, because it allowed me to finish up and get my Associate's degree...So worth it, because when I got back from a mission it made it a lot easier to look at colleges...So wasn't this big deal to go back to school. That was very instrumental and helpful.

Though he did not realize it at the time, the fact that his parents did not push him to go on a mission at age 19 allowed him to open doors to options he would otherwise not have enjoyed.

Heidi, when asked why she encouraged her friends to attend the same institution she had decided to attend, responded:

It was a boy! We had been best friends through high school and he was trying to figure out whether he wanted to go out-of-state, or to [a neighboring institution], or go here before he went on his mission. And we were both like it was her senior year it was February application time for him and I was talking to him about it. I said, "Look you can go to [this institution], get your Associate's before you go on a mission" – as he had a bunch of AP credits too – "and then you can figure out where you want to go after that. It's not that big of a deal." And I don't know what his process was and why he decided to do it but I remember [saying] "You should come. We can be in choir together." It didn't ever work out with him.

She revealed that she had been a little worried about college. She realized the impact that this interaction with her friend and the choir had on her college career. She continued:

I don't think it was as much of a worry, but starting college not knowing anyone...I had been homeschooled, but I'd gone to high school for choir and stuff like that. So, it was kind of new territory, and having someone that was close by...I think that was an emotional need for me. But after school started it was something that I didn't necessarily need anymore, because I started to make friends. But knowing that someone was going to be here – it was helpful for me but it wasn't like the breaking point.

Upon returning from his mission, James was contacted by one of his friends about a job. "When I first got home I worked like a week, as a truck driver. I had worked a ton

of hours for very little pay and [so I was] looking for something else.” When asked how he got the job, he explained “a friend was quitting the job and wanted to find someone to fill it for him.” This seemingly insignificant experience with his friend who helped him get a job set him up to feel discontent and to pursue the next best offer that came his way. He received an offer to work with his brother in real estate.

[T]he job I had initially chose when I came back from my mission was...a title researcher, and that’s one that not many people have degrees. But it’s not a fun job. You spend a lot of time with old, dusty books, and not a lot of people interaction. It was definitely not what I wanted to do full-time, forever and so that definitely motivated me to try to create, and open up some more doors.

Again, the connections that gave him work fueled his desire to continue pursuing a college education.

Similar to the experience James shared about his high school teacher, Johnathan shared the following:

One of my first [concurrent enrollment classes] I probably ever took was...a psychology class...It was a...young professor and a really good teacher. He turned into a friend of mine after that...I can’t even remember his name at this point...If I were to see him and I talked to him, I could recall a ton of memories.

This was the first teacher Johnathan remembers as having an influence on his perception of his education. Even though Jonathan identified this teacher as a friend, and a memorable influence on him, he still could not remember his name.

When asked about how she made the decision to attend a two-year junior college, Margaret shared that she remembered overhearing a conversation in high school concerning college plans.

I heard good things about [the junior college]. There were a couple of people...I don’t know their names. There were some people in high school. She had blonde hair (laughter). I don’t think that helps a whole lot!

Margaret's knowledge of college options grew because of this secondhand conversation she overheard in passing.

As related in an earlier experience, Thomas experienced this kind of sticky interaction through his interaction with his friends at a different institution. When on the topic of internships, he learned that his friends were required to complete one, he decided that it would be good to follow suit. He said, "I was just trying to get summer work make as much money as I could. I ended up making decent money doing internships and at the same time I was just adding depth to my resume that a lot other students didn't really have." As mentioned earlier, this interaction with his friends about internships ended up having a long-term impact on his career.

Vanessa related an experience that impacted how she interacted with her high school counselor. The relationship and ensuing conversations she had with her counselor influenced her desire and direction with relation to the pursuit of higher education. She related this experience.

I had gotten arrested for truancy at the beginning of my junior year, which was all kind of a joke, honestly. I didn't take that situation seriously. But, [my counselor] was the one who actually encouraged me...Nothing in high school was really important to me, so he was the person who influenced me to start college earlier, which was why I graduated from high school a semester early, and started going to college. But, honestly besides the negative attention that I got from my counselor, I don't really feel like there was any more pushing me to do anything...I feel...like things happened along the way that definitely change my outcome, but none of them seemed like they were things to change my outcome as it happened.

It was this interaction with her counselor that propelled her into college.

In each of these situations, the participants were impacted by an experience even though each experience was not engineered, pre-planned, or even intentional. This may

suggest that the benefit of these experiences came from the experience itself and not necessarily as a byproduct of a perceived personal relationship or level of importance.

Control Over Personalization

Regardless of challenges, or personal situation, each participant felt a strong drive to make of their education something that would be useful to them individually. Sometimes this included taking a break from school, or what Tinto (1987) calls a “stopout,” but the reasons varied widely amongst participants. Four of the participants recognized the personal decision, and potential benefit of stopping out from school.

Alex expressed this sentiment repeatedly. In one instance, he discussed a friend whom he admired for his outlook on personalizing his education.

One of my friends who was very successful from college...he just kind of designed his own program. He took the classes he wanted to take. He graduated in English eventually...[He] was willing to blow [certain assignments] off with instructors and just say, ‘Well, that’s what that instructor wants. And I’m going to take what I can get from that instructor and move on with my life, and not worry about pleasing every instructor that [I] have.’

Later he expressed his own, very similar experience. When discussing his empowered attitude towards his education upon returning for a second Bachelor’s degree, he reflected,

[It] meant accepting, ‘Okay. Well this paper that I’m doing is probably only going to get a ‘C’ but it’s okay, because it’s the paper I want to write. It doesn’t matter if I know that instructor is going to be mad at what it is.’

Heidi saw an opportunity to provide support and feedback to a student who was in a situation very similar to one in which she had endured a very negative experience only a few years earlier. She recalled the following:

I ended up working [in] financial aid after I came back from a mission...Working there I was able to help at least a dozen people from dropping [due to issues related to financial aid]. Because I said, 'We can work this out. It will work out during the semester. Don't stress. It won't take that much time. We can take care of this.'

Then she turned to reflecting on her own experience and continued:

I think that I would have tried to make it through if I had someone say...'You will get money. We can put this on hold. Your classes won't drop. You don't owe tuition until we can get this worked out.' If I had someone who said, 'It won't take that long. We can get this worked out'...I probably would have stayed that semester.

She provided the students she worked with in financial aid the information she felt was lacking from her own experience. In essence, she had taken control over, not only her own experience, but also for the responsibility to empower others to personalize their own experiences as well.

James shared a more concrete utility in going to college after he gotten married when he said:

We were looking for activities to do together, and so it seemed like a good one...would be to take some classes. We didn't have any kids. We were both working and so that seemed like a good common activity to do together.

Johnathan also had a pragmatic approach to education. Prior to beginning his coursework for his major classes, he shared this experience regarding his choice to pursue an internship: "Accounting is hard and so wanted to figure out if it's what I truly wanted to get into before I started doing all the classes for it and doing all the hard work for it."

Margaret reflected this tendency in the way she selected her coursework. As previously shared, Margaret was determined that her collegiate experience would be different from her previous school experiences, even choosing a more difficult path. She

continued, “In some cases I took professors where there was more work. But you’re writing papers on a word processor instead of writing essay questions.”

As discussed previously, Thomas had the experience with pursuing internships even though he was not required to complete one as a graduation requirement. He took control of the experience he would have through his educational endeavors.

Vanessa changed from Culinary Arts to English to Psychology then finally to Hotel and Restaurant Management. Each change was brought on by situations that she deemed as important or influential. In the aforementioned experience with the restaurant internship, regarding her change from Culinary Arts to English, she commented simply, “So I decided not to be a culinary student anymore and to be an English major.” Later, regarding this experience, she shared, “I kind of analyzed my entire career path and decided that English would be an easy major to get me into law school.” As stated previously, because she had gotten married to someone who had a good income she felt that she could pursue whatever she wanted to do without worrying about economic outcomes. Following a divorce, she decided to go to law school. Here are her remarks on this topic:

So, I thought, ‘I could be a lawyer and I could sit at a desk, and I could be 50, and that wouldn’t matter.’ So, I took the LSAT. I got a really high score, and decided to go to law school.

In these situations, participants felt a desire to have ownership of their educational experiences, but it did not mean that they would make the best decisions. Neither did it indicate that they felt they knew the right answers, only that they knew the outcome were theirs alone.

Following Purpose

Each participant wanted more than just a degree. The underlying theme regarding the purpose of the education of the participants was that they wanted it to mean something to them. Collectively, they were not seeking a degree just to get a degree. The purpose and implication of the knowledge they would attain from the pursuit of the degree was just as important as completing it. With regard to completion, while as a group they took longer than six years to complete, each cited the purpose as a driving factor.

The most common reason for continuing to pursue educational goals among the participants was the same as the reasons for extending the time to graduation, or delaying altogether. The reason was that of experiencing a feeling of being pushed by a purpose of their own making or one experienced on a larger scale. However, this purpose was often fleeting in nature or malleable in definition. Often the purpose would change in a way that the participant could rationalize any delay, or change in educational path.

Alex shared this experience in the aforementioned delay to serve a religious mission. As previously stated he described it as “so worth it,” claiming that it “allowed me to finish up and get my Associates degree.” The depth of the effect this had on him, and how much he believed in the reason for his academic choice is reflected in the following comment:

Now, when I talk to people who are thinking about going on a mission...[I say] there's a right and there's a wrong time to go. I think you need to go when you're ready and not when everybody else tells you you're ready. I am really grateful I delayed.

Because of his experience, he now counsels others to consider their own needs as they make the same decision.

In a previously mentioned experience, Heidi shared how her desire to pursue a relationship with a male classmate ultimately influenced her to pursue a scholarship that resulted in an increase in her level of comfort with going to college. The pursuit of the relationship was the purpose in her decision to urge the young man to attend school with her, and to audition for a performing arts group where they could participate together. For the purpose of pursuing a relationship, she had this experience “[My father and I] came to campus parked somewhere and we wandered around the [campus] building until we found the office...to turn [the scholarship] in and to audition.” She and her father became familiar with the campus and professors during that visit. She stated that this incident was one of the major reasons she chose the institution she attended.

As James noted in the aforementioned experience how the attacks on the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001 influenced him to stop going to school and to pursue military service. Also, as previously mentioned, Johnathan emphasized that his schedule and lifestyle were his main motivating factors for every decision he made regarding his classes in college. Margaret shared the aforementioned experience with wanting to outperform her siblings and prove she did not need to rely on resources available to her because of her dyslexia. Thomas was driven by his desire to make better money while completing an internship which ultimately helped him develop skills that lead him to the job he currently holds.

Vanessa stated how an incident with an unstable patient at her father's counseling practice influenced her choice of major.

My dad specializes in the treatment of sex offenders so [it was] the interaction with the clientele that made me change my mind...But being a female in that program was a little bit of a different experience than he had experienced being 6' 3", 55-year-old man. I was actually threatened by one of the clients and that's what changed my mind finally. That was the final push.

This experience convinced her to not pursue a degree in psychology. Prior to this experience, she believed she would enjoy following the footsteps of her father, and would be able to make an impact among the population he served. She had a purpose that attracted her to the field, regardless of how that purpose changed after this experience.

As these experiences illustrate, each participant felt a purpose in what they were doing at any given time. The fact that the purpose changed with time or circumstance appeared to have little bearing on the participants' desire to complete a degree.

Obstacle-driven Adaptation

Participants reported experiences that emphasized the importance of adaptation. While adaptation happens on a regular basis in the lives of most people, the experiences shared by participants highlighted the importance of adapting in the face of an obstacle which participants identified as major, even if this identification occurred after the fact.

Alex battled with anxiety and depression brought on by the intensity of his program. The following experience relates how it changed his education:

It's really competitive and I was going to the program and I liked it...But then I kind of hit this point of massive depression that just came on, and honestly I just burned out...The program was really, really intense, and so eventually I got to the point, I was trying to go to the program and...probably had one class and then my

student teaching...I worked it out that I could probably pass the class and get through that. So, what if I just switched to being a Bachelor's of Visual Arts and not get the education degree. They're like 'Oh! Here's your degree! You passed it like a year ago!' I was to the point where I was like "I just need to graduate."

When it was apparent that Heidi's father was going to die, she wanted to stay with him in the hospital. But, in the aforementioned experience she shared that she decided to take his advice to go and take her final. Her father's death became the reason she learned to adapt.

As was already discussed, James shared how the attacks on the World Trade Center caused him to change what he was doing, and how that change affected his ability to pay for school, and his desire to do well in his studies.

In the previously mentioned experience, Johnathan related how he worked to pay for his own clothing and entertainment when he was younger, and how that caused him to learn to take care of himself. While he explained that this was normal for his family, most young people are not given that responsibility. Adapting to these needs led to an affinity for self-care and to his current interest in yoga as a healing practice.

When Margaret experienced learning challenges due to her dyslexia, she adapted by choosing classes that suited her learning style better. Regarding her dyslexia, she added to the aforementioned experience when she shared the following experiences with reference to overcoming obstacles:

I: So, you learn to choose classes or instructors that were more amenable to your situation. Really to your learning style. How early on in your college career did you pick up on that?

MARGARET: Well in high school, I noticed some problems, but you don't really have much of a say in who you get [as a teacher]. At least, I didn't. And in college, you know I did talk with people and ask about 'Well this particular

professor...what are the assignments? What do they have you do?' And, so, in some cases I took professors where there was more work, but, you know, you're writing papers on a word processor instead of writing essay questions.

Margaret took more time to select the right professors for herself, and sought coursework where more time was engaged in habits which catered to her strengths. This was not simply an attempt at general improvement. It was an intentional confrontation with what she had accepted was an obstacle for her to which she responded by purposefully adapting to her new environment.

As previously shared, when Thomas discovered that his friends were required to complete an internship and that his program didn't provide much direction with internships, he undertook the task of contacting hundreds of employers seeking an internship. He received offers for more than one position.

Vanessa seemed to experience obstacles with each decision she made. The aforementioned divorce being one of them. She revealed one complexity that made this an even more difficult emotional situation to deal with in the aftermath, even though she believed that it didn't have a major detrimental effect on her at that time.

Honestly, my divorce was less hard than most. And the reason that I say that is because he actually had come out of the closet. And that's why we decided to get divorced because it was no longer that we were happy being a couple. So, it really was just a happiness factor. He kind of turned it into a financial struggle, but I really think that my divorce is less of like a divorce and more of a mutual separation. I know that sounds so lame and so cheesy, but for us it really was just, 'I'm no longer going to be happy in this situation. Neither are you. Great, let's sign some papers that say that we're no longer in this situation.' We're still friends. Obviously, he doesn't support me financially anymore. But, that for me was the hard part was figuring out what am I going to do financially now that I've graduated from college in a major that people don't make as much money as other majors. What should I do with my life?

It was the question “What should I do with my life?” that evinces the complexity this occurrence brought into her life. As will be discussed later, this event changed the way she thought about how she thought about her life. While she seemed fine with the divorce as an event, the metacognitive shift she experienced took a toll on her well-laid plans and approach for her career, as will be discussed later.

Each of these situations, while varying in degree and form, presented obstacles to each participant’s academic journey. These obstacles were of an external origin or whose source was beyond the control of the participant. As they each recounted these situations, they seemed to relate that they were undeterred from accomplishing something, even if that meant changing or adapting their plans. Each individual handled each situation in different ways but ultimately took a course of action that altered their ultimate destination.

Positive Happenstance

Some influential experiences in the lives of the participants seemed largely due to chance. However, one cannot ignore that those who continue their pursuit of something good tend to find more chances in their favor. As the saying attributed to Thomas Jefferson states, “I’m a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it.” The participants were good examples of those who continued to work in pursuit of better circumstances.

Alex also had a brother who had been working with a college magazine that needed an art director. Alex was pursuing a degree in graphic design at the time, and he became the art director. This experience kept him anchored through some very rough

experiences. It kept him engaged in a collegiate atmosphere, interacting with other students, and created a support network. He related the following:

What happened is my twin came back from his mission, went to [another institution], and he had a friend who ended up getting him [and] said ‘Hey! There’s this magazine. Do you want to come work on it?’ So, he came on to it, and they needed an art director because the art director they had had gotten really, really sick. So, I came in and - I was getting my graphic design degree - and so I came in to start working as their art director. Well actually I just came in to participate at first, and then they were like, “Well, why don’t we make you the art director?” Because the other art director, she hadn’t shown up in like several months, because she was really sick.

This experience with the magazine would provide him a social support group he really needed as he went through the difficult experiences surrounding his bout with depression while in college.

As previously mentioned, Heidi wanted to join the choir with boy she was in interested in, which led her to audition for a performing arts scholarship. This experience led her to become acquainted with staff and faculty on a campus that spoke to her needs and wants.

In the experience shared earlier, James had a brother who had a job in real estate and was able to get a job working with him. He realized that he did not enjoy what he was doing, and so decided to continue his pursuit of a college education.

Through previously highlighted experiences, Johnathan discovered that the nature of an accounting career was not in harmony with his desired lifestyle. This was a career he had always planned on pursuing, but this experience was cause enough for him to change his career focus to self-care and stress management through his practice of yoga.

In an aforementioned experience, when Margaret chose the college she would attend, she was unaware that she had a relative who worked in administration at the institution. This relative opened opportunities to her that directly impacted her ability to pay for her schooling, and allowed her to focus more on her studies.

As mentioned earlier, Thomas had followed a friend to school out of state. That friend did not continue his college education, but Thomas did. Later, Thomas had another friend who was attending a different institution, who was also enrolled in the Construction Management program, but at the other institution. That friend told Thomas that his program required an internship for graduation, and that caused Thomas to pursue internships that eventually gave him a skill set that led to his place of employment at the time of the interview.

As shared earlier, Vanessa found work in the areas she was considering in order to assess each area. She quickly learned what she did not enjoy, and adjusted her path accordingly.

Each participant had experiences where they benefitted from a situation that would not have happened without the decision to initially pursue or to continue pursuing a college education. In each scenario, the participant still did not have a clear path to a career, but continued forward regardless of the ambiguity.

Summary of Type and Nature of Experiences

Overall, there were several types of experiences shared among the participants. The different types of experiences were:

1. Negative reinforcement
2. “Sticky” personal interactions
3. Control over personalization
4. Following purpose
5. Obstacle-driven adaptation
6. Positive happenstance

Negative reinforcements are interactions with staff, faculty, other adults or situations that cause an instinctive, opposing reaction to the given situation. “Sticky” personal interactions are interactions that stayed with the participant over time, regardless of the level of importance placed on the interaction at the time, and that were also impactful. Control over personalization is the need to feel in control of the direction, meaning, and outcome of one’s own education. The idea of following-purpose is the tendency to make life adjustments in alignment with a greater, or higher purpose to life, as perceived by the participant. Obstacle-driven adaptation refers to changes in the life of the participant that were caused by an actual and immediate need, as opposed to foreseen circumstances or situations. Positive happenstance are situations of what is commonly referred to as “being in the right place at the right time.”

Common Participant Traits

While each experience was unique, the participants exhibited common traits throughout their individual, lived experiences. These traits will be discussed in this section.

Naïve Positivity and Stumbling Forward

Some may call it innocence, but the experiences of each participant show a confidence that they can find success on their own. In their minds, everything had always worked out – they had graduated, gone to college, and overcome obstacles without the assistance of others. Simply stated, as a group, the participants did not know, or care that it would be challenging to earn a degree, they just knew that they would. They each stumbled at different points while pursuing an education, but they each exhibited the behavior of stumbling forward towards graduation, as opposed to stumbling away from graduation.

In an aforementioned experience, Alex related his thoughts on delaying his service of a religious mission. As he reflected on the decision to get an Associate's degree in General Studies he said

It doesn't seem like it [would be worth it] because it's just an Associate's degree in generals. Oh, my goodness! So worth it, because when I got back from a mission it made it a lot easier to look at colleges and like 'yeah, your generals have been taken care of.' So wasn't like this big deal to go back to school, and so that was that was very instrumental and helpful to start with. But then I actually decided to go and get an Associate's degree in Graphic Design from [this institution] after my mission...People thought that was really dumb to go do. Well, I'm like, it'll take me a year...Because I had that graphic design Associate's degree I was able to get better paying jobs than most others were getting. I was getting paid \$10-\$11 an hour while they were all getting paid whatever the minimum-wage was at the time. And so, it was a lot easier to maintain finances. I didn't have to take a takeout as much student debt.

Alex's reflection on this experience showed that his decisions weren't necessarily seen as the best decisions to make, at least in the eyes of some with whom he associated.

Regardless, he made the decision anyway, hoping for the best, and it turned out to benefit him and his experiences in college.

Related to the experience Heidi had with applying for the music scholarship, she shared more detail that shed light on that entire experience.

I didn't really have a scholarship-type voice and coming in as a freshman that hadn't been under the tutelage of any of the teachers there or anything like that. So, looking back I can see why I didn't get that scholarship but seeing that the process was important for me. But also, I wish I would've tried to apply for other scholarships in different areas, and that's something that might have helped me. It obviously didn't stop me from going to school. I just got a job, lived with my parents and paid for tuition myself.

What Heidi exuded in the final two sentences of this quote was a belief that if a first option did not work, she could always go with a second, or third option to pay for school.

As was mentioned in a previous section, James only realized what the full scope of education benefits were after he had enlisted. Upon being asked whether the educational benefits were a part of his motivation to enlist, he said

I honestly didn't know a lot about the school benefits until after I joined. I'm glad that my recruiter took care of me that way. I was definitely caught up in a lot of the 9/11 *esprit de corps* that took place. So yeah I guess that didn't really play a huge role.

Then, as was related earlier he recognized that it made it easier to finish college because of the benefits.

Johnathan did not share one specific experience that showed this characteristic. Rather he stated that it was more of how he chose to lead his life in general. He said:

I've always just kind of been concerned with my time and like what brings the happiness in my personal life. And I really do enjoy working, but what brings me happiness is more important to me. And if it was like an occupation that was going to be not valuable to me and my personal life too. So, a lot of it was personal life, responsibility and finances too, that influenced [my decisions].

Johnathan chose to lead his life in a way that assumed success in life would follow if he made decisions he believed would bring him enjoyment.

When Margaret made the decision to attend a certain college, she didn't do so with great deliberation or a predetermined focus. As was mentioned earlier, she overheard a conversation and she only remembers that one of the people in this conversation was blonde. It was that decision to attend that particular institution that led her to become involved in classes that played to her learning style, opportunities with work and campus involvement that changed the way she saw herself in college. She said:

After going to [that institution], I wanted to go to school more, and not just "I'm doing this to make mom and dad happy."...Before, I really didn't think that I would have been able to graduate, then found out that when I graduated from [that institution] it was only Magna Cum Laude - it wasn't Summa Cum Laude because when I took anatomy, I got a 'B'. A very different outcome from high school.

Margaret stumbled into an environment that was the best possible situation for her learning style, but she had only made the decision based on an initial impression from an overheard conversation.

As previously mentioned, Thomas did not fully realize the effect his decisions regarding his ignorance regarding the impact these internships would have on his resume and career. Adding to the previously shared experience, Thomas added:

That's just something that no one really explained to me. I probably didn't realize the full extent of how that was going to benefit me in the future, but it's just something that I did. It still helps me to this day.

Thomas was just trying to get the most out of his experience, and didn't realize the impact it would have on his opportunities both during school and years after graduation.

As previously mentioned, Vanessa got married while in college and some of her decisions about school were based off the employment of her husband. She related this experience in the following words:

One of the main factors that made me decide to not go to law school, was that I married somebody who made a lot of money. So, at that time it was just happiness based. Like, 'oh, I think I could be happy being a psychologist, Or I think I could be happy being a hotel and restaurant manager.' And money no longer had like any driving factor for me

Following her divorce, she reflected "I went to law school for a year, and realized it was the least happy I had been in my entire life." The decision she made to pursue something she enjoyed because money was not a factor when she was married, ended up influencing her current career because she learned that, for herself, she needed to be happy more than she needed a lucrative career. But, as she was making the decisions that led her to this, she was simply making a decision she thought worked believing that her marriage would last, and that happiness was more important.

Dynamic Sources of Intrinsic Motivation and Malleability of Purpose

To the outside observer, this trait can be interpreted as "wishy-washy," or unfocused. But to the participants, this was an important component of the decision to continue pursuing and education. Each participant identified sources of influence that caused them to change what they were doing and to pursue different avenues. As each discussed these changes, in so many words, they related how each change seemed like the right idea at the time.

Alex earned multiple degrees throughout his educational career, but while in the pursuit of one of a Bachelor of Arts in Visual Arts he began to feel the need to finish more quickly than it appeared he would be. He shared the following experience:

I got accepted into the art education program...It's really competitive and I was going to the program and I liked it. There were things I liked about it but then I kind of hit this point of massive depression that just came on, and honestly I just burned out. I mean the program was really, really intense. So eventually I got to the point, I was trying to go [through] the program and...all I had to do was...one class and then my student teaching...I worked it out that I could probably pass the class and get through that. So, what if I just switched to being a Bachelors of Visual Arts and not get the education degree? They're like "Oh! Here's your degree! You passed it like a year ago!" I was to the point where I was like "I just need to graduate," at that point. And that was kind of hard because the Art Ed program, it was so intense and I was so involved with it, but it also kind of destroyed my love of art.

Alex felt the motivation to graduate, and though he initially found value in the Art Education program, his motivation to graduate pushed him to adjust his purpose to meet his current need. Unfortunately, this destroyed the love of the very thing that gave him his initial motivation to pursue the Art Education program. This malleability of purpose does not always benefit the individuals who rely on it often.

Heidi had a similar experience, but her reason for switching majors was less about motivation to change, and more about being easily demotivated.

I got a 'B+' in music theory and I thought, "Hmm, this isn't for me. If I'm going to get 'Bs' then this isn't for me." So, like I said, maybe that's a little shallow. I...did generals the next semester, decided to try Elementary Education, and I did that again for a semester...After that semester I was like "that's not for me, either." So, the next semester I did a bunch more generals just to get through, and I finally switched after my father passed away. I was going on a mission, and the week before I left on a mission I just thought, "You know, I've got two years behind me and I'm gonna finish. I need to find something that I can finish in two years that will work." I [used the degree planning system] for like three or four hours. Like every single thing I could be interested in every single thing I could think of that I would be interested in and what ended up being the closest to my

degree completion was English. Which is...its weird. But I always felt like English was a strong point for me so I didn't even look on [the system] for anything like math or science related because I knew it was more humanities and less science and things like that. So, I knew where my strengths were, and I looked in those areas and it really was between communication in English which do a lot of the same things. But I chose English because I have read so many books. I love literature and as a kid that's all I would do...And I think that was the background [and] looking to English as a [possibility], and so I switched my major before my mission and when I got back I just launched into it absolutely loved it.

This experience shows that Heidi did not need much motivation to look for something better. The small demotivating experience of earning a 'B+' in music theory revealed that she was predisposed to seeking something better. That grade was the small push in the right direction for her to re-discover her true passion. The purpose she was seeking, however, was to change to a major she was closer to finishing.

As explained earlier, James felt a certain *esprit de corps* after the World Trade Center attacks that changed his pathway. He was highly motivated to fight for and defend his country, not yet fully knowing the extent of the educational benefits he would receive. Later he would experience a different purpose and motivation for pursuing an education.

We didn't know each other real[ly] well when we got married, and so we were looking for activities to do together. So, it seemed like a good one would be to take some classes. We didn't have any kids. We were both working and so that seem like a good common activity to do together.

Though his explanation may not be a common purpose for pursuing an education, it served the purpose for James to continue his pursuit of a college degree.

Johnathan had a brother who planted the seed of interest that would greatly influence the path he would take towards a major and a degree.

My brother kind of influenced me towards accounting when I was 17 or 18. When I was like really young he started teaching me about some of his finance classes that he had. He taught me about the time-value of money when I was really young. And so, he told me it was a really good profession to be in as far as job security. So, my brother pushed me towards it.

His brother was not a finance or accounting major, but had shared what he had learned with Johnathan, and that influenced his eventual degree.

As was mentioned previously, Margaret selected her college initially based on an overheard conversation about the institution. Also, as discussed previously, the experience she had at this institution greatly affected her educational pursuits. After completing a two-year degree at the first institution she was considering to which institution she should transfer to complete a four-year degree.

Originally, I had been thinking about going up to [a different institution], because I like more of the small-town type stuff. Just with some of the dynamics of what was going on – my mom had some health challenges and things, so I wanted to stay local. So, then I picked [this institution] to go to. [The first institution I attended] is a small school comparatively. My high school was the size of [the first institution]. And so, coming here, it's like, "What do I do with this? What's this OneStop thing?" Kind of lost with little things. There was a type of freshman orientation that they said I had to go to. So, I went, and I was like, "This is study skills and different things, and I'm already familiar with that." [This institution] was more intimidating. For one thing, you can't walk through the halls without bumping into people.

At [the first institution] I could be involved with clubs and different things. More involved with student life. I wasn't nearly as involved [at this institution]. The only club meeting that I went to, was when I was invited to join Phi Kappa Phi, and that had an impact. I didn't have a car so I took the bus...Since there are a lot of things that go on in the evening, the bus that I would take didn't run in the evening. It was a very different college experience where you go mainly just for classes and not anything else.

The specific reasons Margaret had for choosing one institution over another will not necessarily apply to the pursuit of a college degree for every student, but the fact that she had personally significant reasons mattered for her.

As mentioned previously, Thomas followed a friend to college and was pursuing a graphic design degree when he started. His motivations to go to college were different at the outset compared to where he ended up at the end of his college career.

Vanessa epitomized this trait. She was undeterred from her pursuit of a degree, regardless of the constantly shifting nature of her changes in major. To her, the shifting of the source of her motivation and the adaptation of her purpose for continuing her studies was a natural result of self-discovery. It was never related that her mindset was one of single-mindedness, or fixation on a singular goal that was immutable, or that the goal was the only definition of success. Vanessa exemplified that middle-performing students are competent adapters.

Summary of Common Participant Traits

Throughout the college experiences of the participants, very distinct common traits became apparent. Among those that will be discussed are:

1. Naïve positivity and stumbling forward
2. Dynamic sources of intrinsic motivation and malleability of purpose

Naïve positivity is the belief the participants held that everything would work out in situations they had never before encountered. This also reflected the belief that there was no reason they could not be successful on their own, because they had always succeeded previously without help. Stumbling forward is the result of naïve positivity.

This was the habit of participants to experience hardships, trials, or obstacles without a thought of the difficulty becoming a terminal impediment to the pursuit of an education.

A dynamic source of intrinsic motivation refers to the shifting nature of the source of motivation for participants. It is related to “naïve positivity” in that, the shifting of motivation from one source to another reflected the belief that everything would work out in the end. Related to this was the belief that it was, not only acceptable to mold their purpose, but that it was natural. Due to the malleability of purpose, the participants were not driven to stay focused on one predetermined goal, but rather quickly allowed for variance and adaptation without regard to how far the new purpose strayed from the preceding purpose.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

The critical decisions of each participant had impacts of varying scope and duration. The similarities in perception of short- and long-term effects will be discussed. The common themes that emerged will be bifurcated into short- and long-term effects. The short-term effects tended to be related more directly to their academic experience, while the long-term effect was more reflective in nature.

Evidence for Short-term Effects

Change in duration of path to completion. Each participant identified that their decisions affected how long it would take them to complete a college degree.

The decision Alex made to delay leaving on a mission, which was previously discussed, allowed him to finish an associate’s degree before leaving, and opened more options upon returning to school, mostly with regard to higher wages while in school.

Heidi shared her experience with financial aid representatives soon after the passing of her father. Of this experience, she added, that if they had helped her through her issues in a manner that was more helpful to her, she would have stayed in school. She said, “I probably would have stayed that semester...which I mean looking back it was probably a good thing because I hadn’t switched to English yet, so I probably would’ve just wasted a semester.”

James started college, entered the military, returned, got married, had children, and 16 years after he started missed his graduation ceremony because he was deployed to Afghanistan. Every choice he made pushed his graduation date further back, but those choices also seemed to solidify his resolve to see it through.

In previously shared experiences, Johnathan emphasized that he cared about lifestyle more than pushing through school. This led to taking lighter loads, and extending his graduation date.

Due to the more personalized approach at her institution, Margaret performed better than she had throughout high school. Ultimately this shortened her college experience.

Thomas related the following reflection regarding his decision to stop out from school to gain residency so he could pay in-state tuition rates. He reflected, “I mean, looking back I probably should’ve finished as fast as I can, as fast as I could’ve. I mean, a few extra thousand dollars, when you’re talking about \$30,000 for an education, it’s not that substantial of a percentage there.”

Vanessa changed majors often. Aside from the obvious delays these kinds of changes could cause for a student, in the end she decided to switch to a major she could complete more quickly.

So, then when I switched from English to psychology that, I think that was the first time in my life that I had like 'I want to do this with my life.' I think it was the first that I had like a motivation and I had the end in sight, and I liked it . . . , then . . .when I made the decision to change out of psychology, I honestly a lot of it had to do with that I didn't really care how much money I was going to make in my life any more . . . Also, my ex-husband was making the decision right after we got married to move to Washington D.C. and I could graduate in hospitality a lot faster than I could graduate from psychology. So, I think for me it was just pressure from him to be able to move and to be able to get things done. So, we ended up actually being married but being across the country from each other for the last year of my school when I finished in hospitality. Really a lot of the motivating factor was just that I wanted to graduate and hospitality was something that I could graduate in quicker than any other program that I had been interested in.

Change in financial need. Each participant expressed the need for or the effect of money on their decisions regarding college. While financial need was a notable commonality amongst participants, the way in which they talked about it varied widely.

As was mentioned previously, Alex expressed pride in knowing he had made a decision that afforded him greater opportunities for better employment. It was not, however, only for the sake of earning a higher wage, but for the fact that he did not have to incur as much debt or struggle with finances while in school.

Heidi related her aforementioned experience concerning the death of her father and some of the issues she faced following his passing. Of this time in her life, she added the following:

I took the summer [and] I worked and then I came back in the fall and actually came back for three weeks and I dropped, and I walked away. At that point it was a financial issue, trying to get – you know -- financial said, "Yeah, we can help

you we can get your FAFSA through. We need a death certificate,” and it was too much. It was too much work; it was too much pressure especially after such a traumatic experience for me to be able to go on. And so, I walked away.

This experience, fortunately, was only a temporary stumbling block for Heidi. She later returned to school and sought help to address her financial needs.

In the experiences James shared, he noted multiple sources of financial assistance, as he both worked while in school and took advantage of tuition benefits from his military services.

I think that [the military benefits were] very significant when I couple that with what my work was offering...When I got back from [military training], my work offered school money as well. So, between the two, I didn't have any out-of-pocket expenses for school, and so it definitely made a huge difference. It was kind of a no-brainer for me to keep going [to school].

This was a significant benefit for James because he had gotten married and had young children to provide for, on top of paying for school. At the same time, out of all the participants, James took the longest to graduate.

Johnathan mentioned work and financial need multiple times throughout the interview. He mentioned working as a child with his family, practices of frugality he learned at home, and having worked on and off throughout college. But one of the most telling mentions of work and financial need was when he commented on how much he valued balance in his school schedule. He said, “I had other priorities, [and] demands, working part-time.” He prioritized control of his schedule above everything else, and sometimes work took priority over school.

Margaret worked as Resident Assistant, and as an Assistant to the Dean at the first institution she attended. When she graduated and transferred to the second institution, where she eventually earned a bachelor's degree, she shared this experience:

I had some concurrent enrollment classes in high school, and so I talked to the financial aid office and was asking what scholarship do I need to apply for. And they [asked] "will I be a transfer student or will I be a continuing student?" And they said I'd be a continuing student, so I applied for a scholarship and didn't get it because concurrent enrollment wasn't counted for that, since I was a transfer student. But I had enough money in savings that I could pay for the semester. After that, I went and asked "which one do I need to apply for?" So, they said, well now you definitely are a continuing student, but I was like one credit shy of being a continuing student. So, I looked for work and after I didn't get that scholarship, I...found a job [and] I had to work full-time. So, I worked full-time and went to school part-time. And then, you know, years later, I finally got a piece of paper.

Unlike many students, Margaret did not express any ill feelings regarding this potentially frustrating experience. She just did what needed to be done to get the outcome she was seeking.

A previously mentioned quote from the interview with Thomas epitomizes his focus on earning a little more money while in school, not realizing the impact that his decisions to pursue multiple internships would have on his academic experience as well as his professional opportunities.

Vanessa said that at different points in her college career, there was someone providing for her financial sustenance. She specifically mentioned her parents and a spouse who enabled her to change majors without regard to increased costs due to increasing the time to graduate. Of her parents, she said:

Changing your major is not usually something that is easy. Usually it adds at least a semester onto your schedule. For me the financial impact wasn't as hard as it is for most people. I think that's probably the reason I was willing to change

my mind so often. My parents were funding my school career. So, I didn't see that as much.

Of her spousal support, though relatively short-lived, and as was previously related, she did not feel the need to provide for herself because she did not have to worry about money. As she put it, her decisions were "happiness based." Having financial worries addressed through other people allowed Vanessa freedom of time to consider what she would enjoy doing rather than what she could do to make money.

Change in level of academic engagement. Participants also related how their academic decisions affected their decisions surrounding the level to which they would engage with the academic, and campus communities.

Alex not only experienced this during his first round of undergraduate studies, but also had a heightened sense of control over his engagement level upon his subsequent returns to college. In a previous quote from Alex, he expressed how he chose to do certain class projects based on what he wanted out of the class, and that if it was not an 'A,' he would be okay with that. He then added the following statement that gave greater insight into his mindset about the situation.

When I was going back again, I had had so many credit hours that I could fail a class and still would maintain like a 3.7. So, it was...I mean when you get that many credit hours it doesn't matter.

Alex felt a keen awareness to his control over how engaged he was. Unlike many students, he did not simply disengage because of difficult subject matter, or differences with the professor. He had an awareness that drove him to customize his own experience throughout his educational pursuits.

As was previously shared, Heidi decided to physically withdraw from the campus community so much to the point that she decided to drop out. She was one of the students who, upon returning from her hiatus, expressed a heightened drive to succeed describing it as “launch[ing] into it”.

James showed motivation to engage in his schoolwork knowing he was setting an example for loved ones. He shared the following:

Obviously when you're doing school and work, and the many other things that come into your life, you get really busy. And so, they would say stuff like “Hey, let's go to this.” And I'd have to tell them that I had to do whatever homework I had going on. So, a lot of times they'd be disappointed during that time. But through all of that, my perspective was that I need[ed] to show them that some things were worth sacrificing for, and I felt like college was one of those things.

Though it was difficult for him and his children, James felt a strong desire to show his level of engagement and dedication to completing his college degree.

Jonathan had an experience similar to the sentiment expressed in the example of Alex from earlier in this section. Jonathan experienced this during his undergraduate studies.

My experience in that [finance] class was I was one of the top students, and then I kind of dropped off because I got lazy and already had the grade that I wanted. And that's the story of my life when I was learning...I'd always just try really hard on the first test and see where I landed. And then I would continue to gauge my study levels based on the first test.

Jonathan, too, felt an awareness of his control over his engagement in his studies. He did not feel obliged to engage for the sake of engaging.

In an aforementioned experience, Margaret exhibited a habit that many students do not, especially as freshmen. She made intentional decisions regarding course choice

based solely on her own abilities, and in spite of being diagnosed with dyslexia. Adding further to the previously mentioned experience, she said:

My first semester...I didn't know who to talk to. Then, the next semester you know when you take ...generals...everybody has to take English. Everybody has to take a lot of these things. And so, I could ask around and ask people about what the grading was like and different things.

Margaret did not necessarily want to engage more or less in her education. Rather she actively pursued paths where she could engage more in modes of instruction that fit better with her learning preferences.

As mentioned previously multiple times, Thomas went to great lengths to secure multiple internships throughout his college career. He admittedly did this with the intent of being able to earn more money while in school, but he also was cognizant that internships were not required by his program. He chose to engage more in activities which would both benefit and solidify his knowledge in the degree area he was pursuing.

In similar fashion, Vanessa also pursued multiple internships, but in different disciplines which corresponded with her major at the time. These internships helped her decide to what level she would engage in her chosen major. As it turned out, two of these internships caused her to change her major due to concerns she had about the field she had chosen. She said:

I actually changed my major three times while I was in college. So, I think I did have some critical moments. One of those being, I started out as a culinary student and while I was in culinary school I took on an internship at a restaurant and I realized that I really didn't want to be a chef anymore. I didn't like the hours; I didn't like the environment and the person who I actually. . .as like the chef of the company was actually someone who is on a local TV show, and I had watched the show over and over for pretty much my entire life. And she was a completely different person. So, I think a lot of that decision was based on social pressure. So, I decided not to be a culinary student anymore

Participating in internships allowed Vanessa to determine that she would no longer engage in certain courses. Ironically it was her engagement in education related pursuits that allowed her to disengage from certain majors.

Evidence for Long-term Effects

Pride of graduating. It was apparent that each participant, in their own way, expressed the pride of what they had accomplished in reaching graduation. This may have been due to confirmation bias since the research is specifically about finding out what makes the middle students who graduate different from the rest. Nonetheless, the participants spoke confidently of what they had overcome and accomplished.

Alex touted his multiple degrees. At the beginning of the interview he nonchalantly said, “I went through multiple stages to get my degrees. So, I actually have two Associates degrees and two Bachelor’s degrees, so....”

Heidi expressed her pleasure in the fact that she had just graduated with a graduate degree. She expressed it with pride and confidence, not necessarily bragging or boasting. She said, “I actually just completed my Masters at [a different institution] in English and I’m planning on going and getting a PhD, eventually.”

James discussed how his father influenced him regarding education, and how pleased his father was when he graduated. Regarding the influence his father had on him, he said:

I guess that goes back to my dad, growing up, he didn’t get a degree. He spent his whole career in a job that he didn’t like. And he often would tell us that we needed to do things necessary to finish so that we could have more options. And so, as I was basically in the same situation he was in it resounded with me. And I thought, okay, I needed to follow that advice and open up some doors.

Then when asked if his father was proud when James graduated, he said, “Yeah, yeah! Absolutely and probably a little surprised too!” It was apparent that James felt happy that he was able to graduate.

Johnathan expressed excitement about graduating and securing employment in his chosen major. He said, “It was a big confidence booster that I...got a job. I was out of college. I got a job that was accounting—in my degree.”

Margaret never did very well in high school, and she partially attributes this struggle to dyslexia, but it was easy to note a sense of pride in the fact that she had graduated.

At church, education was highly emphasized. And, you know, not all of my siblings finished school and so I wanted to outdo them. And the nice thing is, is in college my GPA was higher than theirs. So, maybe some sibling rivalry going on there.

Thomas mentioned how it was tough to find work when he first graduated. He expressed some regret and frustration for having gone to college instead of pursuing other avenues for making money. If this time after graduating, he reflected:

When I first got out of school I was competing against guys that were 5, 10 years in the industry. And, they’re willing to take the same amount of money. Me, coming out of school with no experience . . . or limited internship experience. I just kind of decided to take a different route after I got out of school.

Later he shared about he owes his current job to the connections he made during his pursuit and experience of internships. He related the following:

I probably didn’t realize the full extent of how that was going to benefit me in the future, but it’s just something that I did. It still helps me to this day. I mean I have people I have contacted on that list that have companies in Houston. One guy offered me an internship, [when] I was at school. I turned it down to work with the company in California, but I still keep in contact with him today, and that’s actually I got the job at the contracting company when I got out of school.

[When] we moved to Texas. I contacted him and he didn't have a position available, but he was on the board of the Houston Contractor's Association with the boss of the company where I did work. So, it's kind of one of those small connections that you don't realize how that's going to benefit you....I'd send him an email every six months, [to say] "How's it going?" Drop in and just say "Hi!". . .I didn't bug him or anything. That really actually helped me get my current job, because you don't realize how close knit the construction community around...even in Houston. It's a huge city, but the owners of these companies, they all know each other. They all know certain people. When I got laid off, the owner of the company that laid me off, he gave me contact information for this other company, and I didn't end up going to that one. I went to another company on the supply side, and the owner of this company was on the board with the previous owner. So, it's kind of. . . they all know each other. He called him up and gave me a good recommendation. That's how I got hired at my current job.

Vanessa also expressed some trepidation regarding her college experience. Yet, in similar fashion to the experience Thomas shared, she expressed contentment with her current job which was a direct result of her education. She reflected on this in the following way:

I think that I do feel both happy and successful most of the time, even though, you know, money isn't the best thing about hospitality. But it's fun. And that's my main thing. After law school, I just realized that I did want to have fun in my career and I did like it.

Summary of Short- and Long-term Effects

Under the short-term category, the most prominent features were:

1. Change in duration of path to completion
2. Change in financial need
3. Change in level of academic engagement

The change in duration of path to completion refers to the increase or reduction of time to complete the selected course of study. This was often the result of a change of college major, or deferment.

The change in financial need refers to the increased or decreased need to secure funding to assist in paying for college. Most of the time this was an increased need for funding.

The change in the level of academic engagement refers to the perception of the participant to become more involved in, or to withdraw from heavy interaction with school-related activities.

On the long-term spectrum, the common theme discussed was:

1. Pride of graduating

The topic of the pride of graduating, without regard to the level of certainty of impact the participants felt the attainment of a college degree had, this pride was the feeling explicitly or implicitly expressed by the participants that it was a worthwhile time in life.

Commonalities Among College Experiences

Participants shared three commonalities between their college experiences. While the circumstances and situations surrounding each experience varied widely, the central theme was, at their core, the same. The three areas to be discussed are resources, persons of influence, and purpose-drive decisions.

The experiences of the participants reflected similar definitions of the types of interactions they experienced, but were more action-dependent in nature, meaning that either through action or inaction on the part of the participant, the outcome was seen as theirs to determine. Therefore, we will discuss the three common categories of their collective experience.

Campus Resources and Persons of Influence

Overall, early on in their collegiate experiences, and largely throughout college, participants were not highly aware of the resources available to them on campus. The most commonly accessed resource were the advisors such as financial aid, career exploration, and major and academic, but largely were accessed for the purpose of changing a major declaration. By institutional requirement, each participant was required to visit with a general or major advisor at least once, though most participants recounted multiple visits with advisors.

One incident related to accessing another type of resource on campus was the experience Alex related about being referred to a mental health counselor after seven days of not eating or sleeping. Of this experience, he reported the following:

With [the second institution I attended] I didn't know they had a counseling services for depression and anxiety until a doctor referred me there. When I actually came back to [this institution] I went through and had a therapist here. I still see him because he left [this institution] . . . He took me with him to his private practice. I still see him occasionally.

Heidi talked about how she enjoyed doing the research on her classes and majors, and how she “advised herself” through a lot of her college choices. However, she recognized the potential value and impact an engaged advisor could have had on her educational experience. She reflected:

I think part of that was that [decision] was my own decision process. No one else could really tell me or know me as well. But, I kind of wonder if there had been someone that I had been familiar with because, just walking into anybody. . . I'm an introvert, so that's not something that I like to do. But if I had been able to become familiar with someone that could have helped me through that process . . .

I don't know what would've happened. But I think that would have been critical to have someone who would've done what I did, and what I just did for my

husband because he's going to school here at [this institution]—go through all of the options to see what classes I would've liked to take. I mean, our advisors are fantastic. They really are. And the advisors I had in the English department are fantastic, and they sat down and helped me with things.

While Heidi maintained that she made it through on her own for the most part, she acknowledged that assistance from an advisor could have been impactful.

James did not speak specifically about an advisor in college, but did discuss the impact of the Army recruiter in taking care of him with regard to looking out for his future educational needs. He simply stated, "I'm glad that my recruiter took care of me that way." Additionally, as was mentioned previously in this section, students at this particular institution are required to meet with an advisor at least once to declare a major, as well as register for classes.

Johnathan did not mention a college advisor either, but due to the institutional requirement of meeting with an advisor at least once, we can safely assume that this occurred. However, in addition to this required visit, Jonathan mentioned multiple times how he took advice from an older brother on a regular basis. At the time Jonathan was in high school, this older brother was in college and shared advice and knowledge from his own college experience. As Jonathan stated "My brother kind of influenced me towards accounting when I was 17 or 18....So my brother pushed me towards it." He also mentioned that his brother, "[has] been sharing his intellect for a long time with me. It's a good thing, for sure." His brother wasn't a formal advisor, but provided timely and impactful advice nonetheless.

In a previously mentioned experience, Margaret talked about her relative at the first institution she attended, and that she was a club advisor who was impactful on her educational experience.

Thomas also didn't specifically mention an advisor or advising process, but due to institutional requirement it is safe to assume that he did meet with an advisor at least once. This type of contact with advisors of some sort is inferred in his statement regarding internship requirements. He said:

[The staff at this institution] never explained to me about internships when I was going to school. I heard someone mention some here and there. [This institution] didn't require them at the time with my degree. And I knew that [another institution] required you to do an internship with Construction Management. I kind of talked to them about it.

While some contact with an advisor may have occurred, it is obvious that it was not substantive in nature.

Vanessa did not mention any contact with advisors in college, but it is assumed that she did have contact due to the institutional requirement to do so. Additionally, she changed her major three times and therefore had multiple contacts with advisors.

Purpose-driven Decisions

Each decision participants referenced was made with an identifiable purpose, even if that purpose later changed either often or whimsically, or both. In the eyes of the participants, each decision was intentional and purposeful in the moment. Regardless of the fluid nature of the purpose of each decision made by participants, the fact that there was a purpose behind each decision was an important feature.

As stated previously, Alex stated that he delayed serving a religious mission with the purpose of finishing an associate's degree. He remarked that it was "so, worth it."

Heidi applied for a performing arts scholarship which was mentioned previously. She recounted that the process of auditioning and applying for this particular scholarship made her feel very comfortable on campus. It allowed her to envision herself in college, and to have that touchstone experience with her father who was a strong influence and motivator in her life and educational pursuits.

James stated that he enlisted in the military in response to the terrorist attacks in New York. As mentioned in a prior section, he admitted that his reason was largely due to the *esprit de corps* he felt, and not for the educational benefits. However, those benefits greatly enabled him to both pay for school, and work to support a small family while he finished his degree.

As stated previously, Johnathan simply was following the advice of his brother to pursue a career in the world of finance. The desire to attain a secure and steady career, as was described by his brother, was the reason he chose accounting as a major.

Also, mentioned previously, Margaret recalled very little about an overheard conversation concerning the institution she decided to attend first. She stated that she knew the participants in the overheard conversation were speaking favorably of the institution, and that one of those conversing was a blonde girl. She also shared that she enjoyed the setting of this particular institution, being more rural, as was also referred to previously.

Thomas spoke at length about his internship experiences, and the benefits which have come as a result. As has already been shared in a previous section, he was not required to complete an internship for his degree, but still followed the lead of his friend at a different institution in a similar degree program which did require an internship. He ended up pursuing multiple internships.

Every time Vanessa changed her major, she did so purposefully. She began as a culinary arts student. But, following an internship under the tutelage of a popular local chef at a well-known restaurant, she decided to change. As was reported previously, the hours, the environment, and general disillusionment all contributed to making this change.

Also, as was shared earlier, because Vanessa had been married to someone with a good income and then divorced, she felt she needed to provide well for herself and decided to go to law school. Having evaluated her choices, she decided that English as a major would be the best fit for her to get into law school. Less than a year into law school, she decided that she wanted to drop out because it wasn't satisfying work for her. So, she decided to pursue the path her father followed, and began pursuing a psychology degree. However, following the previously recounted incident of nearly being accosted by a patient of her father, she decided that would not be the life for her.

After all of this, she decided that her own happiness and satisfaction were more important than a large paycheck. She returned to the hospitality industry and graduated in Hotel and Restaurant Management.

Summary of Commonalities Among College Experiences

Many of the experiences in college were more varied in duration, however, similarities emerged as demonstrated in the previous sections. Experiences ranged from learning how to manage challenges with dyslexia to dealing with divorce, but the common experiences concentrated around these two areas:

1. Campus resources and persons of influence
2. Purpose-driven decisions

Campus resources are people, places, or things that participants had, or did not have, access to while they were students. Common examples are counselors, advisors, disability services, and tutoring. Persons of influence were often adults in the lives of the students. However, on more than one occasion, this person was a peer with either an intimate or an antagonistic relationship with the participant. It is interesting to note that those participants who had deferred a portion time during their college years, related that they began to be more concerted in accessing various campus resources.

Purpose-driven decisions were those which the participant deemed as having been influenced by a self-defined, higher purpose. This was without regard to whether that purpose was lasting or fleeting in nature.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The findings of this study add to the literature in a variety of areas. Specifically, the findings broaden the understanding of modes and levels of intervention or interaction that can be impactful to a student's decision to persist. While a variety of areas deserve attention, I first discuss three broad categories of student needs. Second, I provide a series of potential implications, initiatives, and further research.

Overarching Needs

Each of the previously discussed categories, traits, and experiences are pieces of a much larger puzzle. While it is advisable not to overgeneralize any initiative to serve the middle-performers, the practice provides a great starting point for any organization.

In 1997, Gordon B. Hinckley gave an address with specific reference to the retention needs of another type of large institution. In this case, he referenced a religious institution. Entry into a religious congregation is similar to the process of entry into an institution of higher education. Both require a belief that there will be a benefit to engaging in the education and experience. Both require an enduring engagement with the organization in order to reap the perceived benefits. Both emphasize learning in an organized setting, as well as application of the said learning outside of organized settings. Both struggle with engagement of the enlisted constituents. Hinckley listed three needs that each new congregant must have fulfilled in order to increase the likelihood of lasting engagement. Those three things are "a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing with 'the good word of God'" (Hinckley, 1997). While the indoctrination a student receives in

college is different from that of a religious organization, the same principles can be adapted to the present study, as follows:

1. Every student needs a trusted and supportive third party.
2. Every student needs a purposeful, personal motivation to engage.
3. Every student needs personally meaningful learning experiences

A Trusted and Supportive Third Party

Each participant identified at least one person who played an influential role in influencing decisions the participants made to continue their pursuit of a college degree. The duration of the influence each identified individual varied, nonetheless, the influence was sufficient to affect the outcome of the decision-making process. Engagement with third parties is a well-documented factor affecting college retention and completion rates (Creighton, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and is one of the four conditions for student success identified by Tinto (2012). More specifically, it is described as the involvement, or engagement in academic and social settings with faculty, staff, and peers.

This need is also documented among students of diverse backgrounds often citing the effect of peers who were culturally similar, or displayed some trait, which was desirable for the students to attain. Some examples are academic achievement, career exploration and engagement, and social acceptance. (Lopez-Wagner, Carollo & Shindlecker, 2013; Watt, Huerta, & Alkan, 2011; Seidman, 2005).

A Purposeful, Personal Motivation to Engage

Of all areas of research related to college completion, motivating students is the among the most difficult area to which one can apply hard data. As the professor and

textbook author, Constance Staley (2011) expresses, each student needs to have a dream to stay motivated. As she puts it, “Dreaming is the first step to creating the future you want, but making dreams come true requires planning and hard work” (Staley, 2011). However, she also states that “Dreams alone are not enough when it comes to ‘creating the future.’ As professional life coach Diana Robinson says, ‘A dream is a goal without legs.’ And without legs, that goal is going nowhere” (Staley, 2011).

A source of motivation is self-created, or self-accepted. A dream cannot be forced upon another with the expectation that it will have a lasting influence. It can only be influenced. So, this influence must be wielded carefully to not appear to be attacking the dream. Another author refers to this need to be driven by personal motivation as “beginning with the end in mind” (Covey, 1989), being understood as the need to establish a reason for following the plan an individual adopts in order to reach the desired accomplishment.

Each participant in this study expressed a belief in something bigger, and more meaningful, at every decision point. This meaning is derived specifically for the purpose the student believes will affect lives and future. If the student accepts this purpose – either, through his or her own volition, or because it is given to him or her by someone he or she trusts – the student will find a source for his or her own motivation to keep moving forward.

Students who do not feel (a) that they are part of something bigger, (b) that their role to play is meaningful to them, or (c) that the education they are receiving will help them fulfill said role, will be less likely to complete a degree program. They will not

engage fully in the academic experience because they do not feel compelled or convinced that the education will benefit their purposes. The dream, or source of motivation, must remain under the ownership of the student in order for it to provide long-lasting, purposeful motivation to engage.

Personally Meaningful Learning Experiences

Learning outside of class is difficult to predict or control since many variables are at play, such as who the student is with, where they are, what they are thinking about, etc. However, learning in formal settings is more of a controllable environment. The effect of student-professor relationships is well documented (Tinto, 2012; Delaney, 2008; Lundquist, Spalding & Landrum, 2003; Nippert, 2001). Since the professor is the incumbent key facilitator of learning in the classroom, the relationship students perceive between themselves and the professor can catalyze or inhibit meaningful learning experiences. Driven by the purposeful motivation to engage, students experience meaningful learning in and out of formal learning settings. If they do not have a purposeful motivation, it will be much more difficult to experience meaningful learning.

The saying goes, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” Ready, in this sense, signifies not only a physical or mental readiness, but also a maturational, emotional, and even spiritual readiness to learn. Learning is derived from perception of purposefulness to the student at the time the learning experience occurs. If the student does not, at the moment of the experience, immediately see value in what is being taught, it is not likely that learning will occur. However, as demonstrated by all the participants in this study, learning often occurs from these kinds of experiences later in life when

circumstances change. Thus, the “teacher appears” sometimes only in the recollection of past learning situations.

Regardless of the testimonials of each of the participants that show that learning did not always occur in real-time, educators should continue to mindfully approach every interaction with students. Whether the interaction is direct or indirect, live or asynchronous, it is a potential learning experiences that may affect the eventual educational outcomes of each student.

Implications, Initiatives, and Further Research

Potential Implications

One of the potential implications of the present study is the impact on funding allocation. If middle students make up a significant portion of the student body at an institution, and administrators agree with the finding that differences exist in the reasons behind academic readiness measures amongst students, then the decision to channel funding into initiatives that serve broad groups of students may not be the best path to sustaining impact on graduation.

The academic variation between one middle student and the next may appear to be negligible, but the reasons for variation are vast. A doctor does not take a group of people and prescribe the same treatment if each patient appears to have the same symptoms. The doctor takes the time to evaluate each person individually and then prescribes a treatment. A program cannot treat students as a group; they must be treated as individuals. Each student must be diagnosed separately, and current advisory methods are largely lacking in resources to fully treat students individually. More funding could

be helpful in allowing personalized advising to take place, so not only the procedural needs of a student are met (e.g. registration, major selection, etc.), but also the individual academic needs, such as identifying sources of motivation, establishing habits for auto-remediation, and developing patterns of persistence.

Another potential implication of the aforementioned implication is the subsequent need to reorganization of interventional initiatives and programs. Reorganizing an entire student affairs division around serving students as individuals requires toppling the siloes, mixing their contents together, and dividing that content among all personnel regardless of department name or office location. There can still be staff members who are specialists in internships, or selecting a major, but a student should not be restricted in where they can seek help based solely on the division of duties.

Potential Staff and Faculty Initiatives

Nudge intervention. Fuhrman (2014) writes about an initiative at the University of Washington - Tacoma using the software platform called Persistence Plus. Fuhrman describes this platform as:

...a personalized mobile support system that uses behavioral interventions to reach out to, engage and support students throughout their college years. The service helps keep students on track by delivering a mobile “nudge,” a daily text message that reminds them about quizzes and tests, helps with time, stress, and performance management, and encourages appropriate behavioral responses. (Fuhrman, 2014, para 3)

The idea of personalized reminders and interactions with students on a regular basis is supported by the present study. If this outreach were performed by somebody who was, or who could become, a trusted and supportive third party, as opposed to a software platform the impact would potentially be greater. For operational efficiency, a

similar platform could be used to facilitate the interaction, but the perceived personal touch should not be sacrificed for expediency.

Every interaction counts. Training could be provided for all staff and faculty regarding the collective impact that small interactions have over the institutional life of a student. Awareness that every interaction could be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, or could be the pivotal moment a student decides to continue forward has the potential to change the experience of every student on campus. No single staff member or department should be solely responsible for caring for students. Rather, it is the collective responsibility of every faculty, staff, and administrative member of the college community to provide a meaningful experience for each student.

Potential Teaching Initiatives

Teach purpose-driven decision-making. Instead of only focusing on critical thinking and decision-making as stand-alone skills, more opportunities to discover purpose, and develop personal goals should be afforded. None of the participants knew exactly what they wanted to study or become when they started college. None of them ended up exactly where they thought they would. Nevertheless, each of them believed strongly in the purpose they espoused at the moment of making decisions, which were identified as critical to their success in college. This could be done as a part of a first-year seminar, an extended orientation activity, or as a writing assignment in a freshman composition class.

Teach positivity mindset. The habit of positivity gives grit, persistence, resilience, and hardiness to life and direction. Dweck (2006) calls this the “growth

mindset” that is driven by “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (p, 7). In other words, you can overcome any obstacle, and become anything you are willing to work towards becoming. This could also be something to be discussed in a first-year seminar, an extended orientation activity, or as a writing assignment in a freshman composition class.

Further Research

Larger sample. This study does not produce generalizable findings even for the institution from which all the participants graduated. A larger sample size would provide findings that are more reliable. Additionally, finding participants at similar institutions would broaden the applicability of the findings.

Birth order effect. The birth order of the participants may also influence how the level of coping strategies that have been developed by the time they reach high school, and college. This could affect study habits to motivation, and multiple other attributes.

Effect of stopping out. The participants who stopped out for different reasons returned with greater drive to take advantage of opportunities in college. This may lead one to think that time away from education could be beneficial to students. In addition, the effect of a “stopout” on those from the middle, bottom, and top parts of the high school graduating class could be different. With recent initiatives to complete, the question should can be raised, “Do we overemphasize finishing quickly at the sacrifice of finishing at all?” Additionally, the reason for the “stopout” might affect the outcome as

well. Does the effect of a “stopout” for work or financial reasons differ from that of military or personal reasons?

Demographic differences. Finally, basic demographic differences could also be examined as they relate to degree completion. Identifiers such as gender identification, race, ethnicity, family composition, family income, relationship status, and others could be studied on a larger group of middle students.

Final Thoughts

A familiar adage provides great insight for the remainder of this discussion: “An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.” If educators desire to have an impact in the meaningful, educational attainment of middle students at the institution that was the subject of this study, all retention and completion efforts focused on broad categories of students must be thoroughly examined. Educators have become too comfortable with investing time and resources in the programs that focus on the “pound of cure” approach because it is more efficient to disburse a pound at a time, than it is an ounce here and an ounce there.

One of the factors that make it difficult to work with students in the middle is the huge variation in performance, remediation needs, past experiences, and degree of definition of desired outcomes. As stated in the second chapter of the present study, the group of middle-performers can be, and often is, easily ignored as a natural result of the use of averages, and predetermined quantifiable calculations that are supposed to identify at-risk students.

Although the differences between a 4.0 GPA student and a 1.0 GPA student are more easily discernible, the reason for the differences between a 2.8 GPA student and a 3.0 GPA student are often not easy to identify. It takes more work to determine the individual needs that each middle student possesses. For that matter, every student, regardless of high school graduation ranking, could benefit from a more personalized approach. At-risk students are often given more attention to help tend to their individual needs. However, every student is at risk of not completing until they have completed. If students fail to have the right habits developed, or the right plan in place when the storm of wrong circumstances converges, every student can fail.

As a whole, educational institutions tend towards categorization influenced by research, and basic, descriptive statistics. Middle students do not lend themselves well to analysis based on basic, descriptive statistics. Figure 5.1 provides a hypothetical overview of how educators currently deploy resources, and compares it to the potential impact in the educational outcomes of the upper, middle, and lower ranked students.

Are we allocating too much time and resources to areas where we are likely to have little impact? Are we neglecting the vast majority of students who, with an ounce of intervention, could realize enormous educational benefit? Do we only help those who are already falling out of the van, and neglect advising others on how to recognize if they are next to fall?

As with falling out of a moving vehicle, the difference between staying in the van, and falling out, was a subtle difference of shifting my weight a couple of inches. If I had

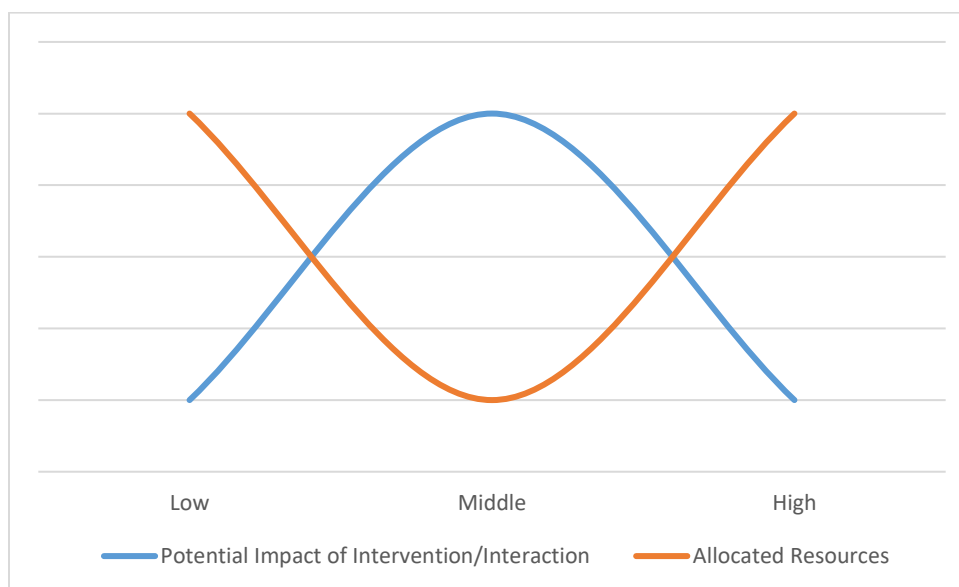


Figure 5.1. Hypothetical relationship between impact and resources among student ranking groups

been trained to recognize the subtleties of weight distribution and had been given an opportunity to feel that for myself, staying in the van would have been a foregone conclusion. However, that would have taken a lot more time, than actually falling out required. As educators, are we willing to allow students to “fall out” of college because it is too time-consuming to help them individually? Would we prefer to continue on our path of treating large groups of students in siloes and accept the mediocre impact that has brought? Is it worth it to us to truly individualize the experience each student has by working with them individually? These and other questions should be at the forefront of every college preparation discussion, postsecondary retention conversation, and degree completion initiative. Without addressing these underlying questions, it is likely institutions will continue to do what they have always done and will expect different results, but they will spend more time, effort, and funding to do it.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Form, University of Nebraska – Lincoln



Official Approval Letter for IRB project #13616

December 3, 2015 - official approval letter

Nathan Hanamaikai
Department of Educational Administration

Barbara LaCost
Department of Educational Administration
127 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20131013616 EP
Project ID: 13616
Project Title: Critical college experiences of the middle third of the high school graduating class

Dear Nathan:

This is to officially notify you of the approval of your project's Continuing Review by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the committee's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the subjects in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

Date of review: 12/01/2015

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- * Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to provide the Board with a review and update of the research project each year the project is in effect. This approval is valid until 11/30/2016.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Rachel Wenzl, CIP
for the IRB



APPENDIX B

Institutional Review Board Approval Form Western United States University

Nathan Hanamaikai

From: Nancy Bartlett
Sent: Wednesday, September 25, 2013 11:55 AM
To: Nathan Hanamaikai
Subject: IRB Action Request Approval #01093 "Critical College Experiences of the Middle Third of the High School Graduating Class"

September 25, 2013

Dr. Hanamaikai:

You recently submitted an IRB Action Request form dated September 17, 2013, providing revised documents for recruitment, informed consent and the research proposal for your research project entitled, "Critical College Experiences of the Middle Third of the High School Graduating Class" (#01093).

The Chair of the IRB, Dr. Andrew Creer, has reviewed and approved your requests as submitted. This IRB approval is effective until September 23, 2014 (365 days after the date of approval).

To ensure that individuals and organizations involved in your study are aware that you have received IRB approval, please use the IRB tracking numbers above on all documents and communications associated with these project as identification of IRB authorization (i.e., IRB Approval #01093).

Please notify me, the IRB Administrator, at (801) 863-8156, BA203d, of any changes made in the instruments, consent form, or research process, so the IRB can review and approve them before the change is implemented.

When you have completed your research, please notify the IRB. In keeping with Federal regulations, you must retain your research data for a period of 3 years from the date of completion of the research.

If you have any questions, please let me know. We wish you well as you continue with your research!

Best regards,
 Nancy L. Bartlett

University Compliance Officer
 IRB and Post-Award Grant Administrator
 Division of Planning, Budget, and Policy
 Utah Valley University
 800 West University Parkway, MS272
 Orem, Utah 84058
 Room: BA203d
 801-863-8156
Nancy.Bartlett@uvu.edu

Disclaimer -
 This e-mail transmission and any documents, files, or previous e-mail messages attached to it may contain CONFIDENTIAL information that is legally PRIVILEGED. If you are not the intended recipient or a person

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Assigned participant ID:

Interview date: _____ Location: _____ Time: _____

Description of location: _____

Introductory Text

I will provide a prompt and then ask a series of questions related to the prompt. I will provide sub questions and prompts as necessary based on your information. I am using a form for writing notes as we speak. The conversations will be recorded and later transcribed; a copy will be sent to you for your perusal and edits.

Questions

Prompt: *Think back on your time during college about times where you made decisions which ended up being critical moments while you were in school –maybe a negative or positive moment or situation which was motivational, important, memorable, or influential to you. Tell me about it.*

Question 1: **Describe as many of these situations as you can remember.**

Question 2: **Describe the process you used for making this decision.**

Question 3: **Describe how your decisions impacted you in the short-term and long-term.**

Question 4: **What, if anything, do you now understand about each situation that you did not understand then?**

Question 5: **What other influences impacted your decision to stay in college?**