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Factors That Preclude College Completion of Students at a Technical College in Georgia

by
Cicily P. Mapp

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University
2017

Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Cicily P. Mapp under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Cicily P. Mapp

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Name

May 3, 2017

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Date

Abstract

Factors That Preclude College Completion of Students at a Technical College in Georgia. Cicily P. Mapp, 2017: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: academic achievement, academic advisement, first year college students, historical Black college and university, retention

Key indicators for the success of colleges and universities are the rates of retention, persistence, and college completion (Hendon & Jenkins, 2012; Schreiner, 2014; Yunfan et al., 2015). However, current data indicated that a large number of institutions of higher education had to identify strategies designed to increase the academic success of the students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The purpose of the study was to identify and understand the factors that influenced graduation rates of students who attended a technical college located in central Georgia. A primary goal would be to obtain information that could be used by teachers, staff, and educational leaders to serve the specific needs of the students. At the same time, this type of information would also be useful for educational policy makers and researchers.

Three research questions guided the development of this research. This applied dissertation required that the researcher collect data using (a) focus groups of academic advisors on campus (Research Question 1); (b) a survey that would directly assess the students' level of agreement in four domains, background, financial, academic, and social (Research Question 2); and (c) information from the focus groups with the advisors and the survey administered to students (Research Question 3). Thematic data analyses and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected from qualitative and quantitative data. Results showed the advisors reported high levels of self-efficacy. Secondly, the advisors discussed the aforementioned 5 factors as those that influenced the college completion rates of the students they served. Responses for the 2nd research question were obtained from the data collected from the majority of the participants who were males (93.6%), and the majority of the sample was Caucasian American (62.8%). Data analyses revealed students did not report any barriers from the 5 domains as those that affected their ability to graduate in the expected time frame. It seems as though their responses indicated they had positive and healthy attitudes toward and experiences with the same type factors that the academic advisors expressed concern. Patterns from the data also revealed two items in the social barrier domain with which participants indicated disagreement. Patterns from the participants' responses showed they disagreed with the statements "I feel intimidated by my instructors" (M = 1.62) and "I do not like working in groups with fellow students" (M = 2.16). Research Question 3 asked about the similarities and differences between the perceptions of advisors' and students who participated in the study. Findings showed that, although the advisors identified barriers that were placed in 5 domains, the students did not agree that any of the barriers they were asked to rate were barriers to graduation for them. Findings to specific questions participants were asked to respond in each domain are also presented and discussed. Findings to specific questions participants were asked to respond for the 5 domains are also presented and discussed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter is used to describe and explain the rationale for the development of this research. After an overview about the concern this study focused upon is summarized, the specific problem this study was designed to address is presented. Next, the background and justification for the research are described. Then, the purpose of the study is explained. Following this discussion, definitions of terms as they are used in the context of this study are outlined. The last section of this chapter is a summary of the information discussed.

The concern here is that not all of America's students are able to attain academic success (Tinto, 2006). Success in attaining an education from an institution beyond high school may be defined in terms of setting goals and pursuing them to a logical conclusion (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Falasca, 2011; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Some educational programs have attendance requirements that must be met through the utilization of resources around the campus in an effort to increase the probability of student success (Miles, 2014). Goncalves and Trunk (2014) concluded that although some students have a clear picture of what their educational goals entails, others flounder and are unaware of the availability of resources that exist on campuses to assist them in their pursuit of a degree.

Academic advising programs, established to assist students in making informed choices in their educational career, is one such resource that has proven to be invaluable to students (Schreiner, 2014; Williams Sy, 2013). However, not all students have access to appropriate advisement, or it could be that they are not aware this particular resource is available to them (Williams Sy, 2013). In the context of this research, college completion is the focus and it refers to a student's ability to either obtain an associate's degree, a

certification, or diploma.

Statement of the Problem

Retention, persistence, and graduation (or college completion) rates are considered to be vital components of an institution's academic success in higher education (Hendon & Jenkins, 2012; Schreiner, 2014). Nonetheless, nationally and internationally, a large number of higher education institutions have had to deal with the reality of low enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (Yunfan et al., 2015). It does seem, however, some schools fare better than others in student retention and college completion (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). The problem addressed in this research was that students were not attaining positive outcomes (i.e., retention, persistence, and college completion) at the expected rate in the school that served as the setting for this investigation.

Background and Justification

America's future depends on its ability to ensure that all of its students are able to maximize their academic potential (Blair & Raver, 2014; Change the Equation, 2010; Hendon & Jenkins, 2012). For example, the state of Georgia recognized that the future of the state depended on the ability of educators and all concerned parties to improve the performance of students in what is commonly referred to as STEM areas, that is, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Change the Equation, 2010). By 2020, it is projected that over 60% of jobs in Georgia will require a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree (University System of Georgia, 2011). Available data from the University System of Georgia (2011) indicated that approximately 42% of the state's young adults are prepared at those levels.

To remain competitive, Georgia must not only maintain current graduation levels,

but also produce an additional estimated 250,000 graduates in the immediate future (University System of Georgia, 2011). Data suggested that Georgia students continue to underperform in the STEM areas in comparison to their counterparts in other states; similarly, the achievement gap (e.g., between Black, Hispanic, and White students) continues to persist in the areas of science and mathematics (Change the Equation, 2010). According to Lapayese, Aldana, and Lara (2014), "One of the most formidable challenges is the miseducation of students of color" (p. 11). The majority of the student population at the institution where this study took place was African American (52.4%), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Ethnic/Racial Composition of the Student Body at the Targeted Institution, Academic Year 2014-2015

Ethnicity/race	Enrollment no.
African American or Black	6,381
American Indian	26
Asian	109
Hispanic or Latino	302
Native Hawaiian	6
Two or more races	126
Unknown	181
White	5,034

After years of concern about enrollment, low completion rates, and continued

competition for increasingly scarce resources, the decision was made to consolidate two technical colleges (Burks, 2014). To ensure the anonymity of the targeted institution, it is referred to as the Technical College in Georgia (TCIGA, 2014). TCIGA is composed of two technical schools that were consolidated into one institution. As shown in Table 2, the enrollment for both schools continued to decline, and this pattern continued even after the consolidation (Burks, 2014).

Table 2

Enrollment Data Over a 3-Year Period

School	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
College 1	8,517	7,010	
College 2	6,122	6,063	
Consolidated colleges			12,165

Additionally, despite specific efforts that have been made, the retention and graduation rates continue to be challenges for educators at TCIGA (Burks, 2014). These data are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. Educators at the school have made a public commitment to increase graduation rates. For instance, because of its position in the state of Georgia, the school was selected to become a part of a national reform network (i.e., Achieving the Dream) that is designed to increase student success (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2015). Furthermore, the institution works with Complete College Georgia, which involves a total of 60 universities and colleges that have been given the task to develop plans that would result in an increase in college completion at their respective

institutions (Office of Institution Effectiveness, 2015). Table 3 shows the graduation rates over a 3-year period and Table 4 shows the retention rates over the same period.

Table 3

Number of Graduates and Awards Over a 3-Year Period

School	Graduates	Associate degrees	Diplomas	Technical certificates
		2012-2013		
School 1	1,516	245	491	1,353
School 2	1,882	133	422	1,502
		2013-2014		
School 1	1,436	209	413	1,437
School 2	1,688	133	240	1,486
		2014-2015		
Consolidated colleges	3346	280	627	4,028

If students are expected to make satisfactory progress, the first step appears to be keeping them in school (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Lynch, 2014; Pike & Graunke, 2014). Current research suggested that at least 33.3% of first-year students do not return for the second year (U.S. College Compass, 2009). In general, at higher education institutions, the goals are to recruit, retain, and graduate their students, but when this is not happening, institutions have to find ways quickly to address the situation (Goncalves

& Trunk, 2014; Lynch, 2014).

Table 4

Retention Rates Over a 3-Year Period

School	%
2012-2013	
School 1	59.6
School 2	69.3
2013-2014	
School 1	54.1
School 2	68.0
2014-2015	
Consolidated colleges	61.3

Clearly, there is a need for educators, researchers, and educational policy makers to develop collaborative efforts to identify effective methods to help all students in American schools attain positive outcomes (Change the Equation, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). The focus of this research was with first-year students who attended a technical college located in the central region of Georgia. The researcher has worked in the area for over 5 years. She has developed a relationship with staff at the school where this research took place. She is not employed by the school, nor is she in a supervisory relationship with any employees at the school. She served as a

researcher only.

Purpose of the Study

Educators at the setting of this research had attempted to provide the assistance students needed to improve their retention rates through academic advisement. The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influenced the college completion rate (i.e., graduation rate) of students who attended a technical college located in Georgia. This information would then enable the researcher to identify the factors that would preclude college completion of these students. The goal would be to obtain information that could be used by teachers, staff, and educational leaders to serve better the specific needs of the students. At the same time, this type of information would also be useful for educational policy makers and researchers. For instance, it is imperative that schools are able to ensure the appropriate services, resources, and personnel are available for students to improve their retention, persistence, and college completion rates.

Definition of Terms

There are some concepts that need to be explained as used in the context of the investigation. The following terms are defined to help provide a clear understanding about the work that was planned for the study. These terms are subsequently summarized.

Academic achievement. According to Bossaert, Doumen, Buyse, and Verschueren (2011), academic achievement can be described as the attainment of one's educational or academic goals. It is normally an observable outcome. For instance, academic achievement can be measured by achievement or aptitude examinations, accomplishments such as promotion to the next grade level, graduation, honor roll, scholarships, fellowships, or other academic recognition or honors.

Academic advisement. This term refers to a formal process where a student

receives care and concern from an experienced professional who can help shape a student's college experience (Williams Sy, 2013). Advising is a dynamic process in which students can receive critical information they need to make the most important decisions about college. Some of the decisions would revolve around choices such as those affecting academic majors, career goals, courses, secondary fields of study, cocurricular activities, and life planning (Steen, Henfield, & Booker, 2014). As explained by Williams Sy (2013), academic advising could lead to positive student outcomes (e.g., increase the probability of academic success, enhance persistence, improve retention, and resolve any remediation concerns or special needs).

Achievement gap. This term is used to describe the instances when significant differences in academic achievement exist between subgroups of students (Change the Equation, 2010). For instance, some of the variables that have been assessed include differences between race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, urban versus suburban, English language learners, and special needs (Change the Equation, 2010). In the United States, national emphasis has been placed for all schools to assist all students in maximizing their potential. It was concluded by Change the Equation (2010) educators that "Closing the [achievement] gaps is both a moral and an economic imperative" (p. 1). If students are expected to succeed in the global economy, then they will have to improve their academic achievement levels, particularly in the areas of STEM (Change the Equation, 2010).

At-risk students. This term refers to students who would need some type assistance (e.g., intervention or prevention measures) to achieve academic success (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], Office of Special Education Programs, 2014). Some of the groups of students who have been identified as at risk include minorities (African

American, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander), females (in some academic areas, for instance in the STEM courses), low socioeconomic status, those with poor academic achievement levels, and special needs students (USDOE, Office of Special Education Programs, 2014).

First-year students. This term refers to those students who attend college, technical, or vocational schools for the first time (NCES, 2013). As explained by the NCES (2013), first-year students would only have enough course credit hours to be classified as freshmen in college.

Persistence. In the context of this study, persistence refers to the extent in which the student continues to make satisfactory progress in the institution of higher learning and remains in school until the requirements for graduation are completed or their specific goals have been achieved (University System of Georgia, 2011).

Retention in higher education. Retention in higher education refers to those instances when students remain in college, vocational, or technical schools from the first time they enroll (i.e., the freshmen year, first year of graduate or professional school, community college, vocational or technical school, etc.) until they have achieved their educational goals and/or completed the requirements for the degree they seek (Pike & Graunke, 2014). As stated by Pike and Graunke (2014), retention rates (along with graduation rates) are often used to assess institutional effectiveness and quality.

Student engagement. As explained by Goncalves and Trunk (2014), student engagement refers to the effort and amount of time students expend on their educational goals. Examples provided by these researchers included activities students could engage inside of the classroom (e.g., attend class, participation in class, reading materials, successful progression, learning, etc.) and outside of the classroom (e.g., advisement and

other interactions with staff other than professors, honor societies, athletics, choir, band, newspaper and/or year book staff, student organizations, community service, study abroad, research, interactions with faculty members, etc.).

Summary

As stated previously, the problem this study was designed to address was that students were not attaining positive student outcomes (i.e., retention, persistence, or college completion) at the expected rate. Specifically, the retention rate at the Georgia technical college has continued to decrease (Burks, 2014). Consequently, concern about the need to identify factors that would preclude college completion has increased at the institution that served as the setting for the study. The next section of this project presents a discussion about the factors that research has suggested may influence college completion rates.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

Faculty, staff, and administrators in the setting in which this study took place are interested in improving retention rates. In general, retention rates are used as a measure of how well first-year students are settling into the higher education environment (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Townsend and Wilson (2006) also reported that retention rates have a direct influence on graduation rates. Specifically in the context of this study, the concept of retention rates as defined by Pike and Graunke (2014) is used. According to Pike and Graunke, retention in higher education is evidenced when students remain in college, vocational, or technical schools from the first time they enroll (i.e., the freshmen year, first year of graduate or professional school, community college, vocational or technical school, etc.) until they have achieved their educational goals and or completed the requirements for the degree in which they seek.

Furthermore, Pike and Graunke (2014) concluded that retention rates (along with graduation rates) are often used to assess institutional effectiveness and quality. However, retaining students in higher education continues to be a challenge for some schools (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Grosling & Heagney, 2009). As a result, educators in institutions of higher education have attempted to improve retention rates (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). For example, some schools reported the establishment of academic advisement, particularly for first-year students, is a critical issue among the institutions that directly impact retention rates (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Peer Analysis tool, one college in Georgia reported that out of 966 freshmen, only 22% were retained by their second year.

It was suggested in the research that enrollment in any higher education institution

begins with the admissions process (Harrington & Fogg, 2009). Factors such as what happens once the student arrives on the college campus (e.g., academic achievement, mentoring), as well as what the student brings to the school (e.g., background, attitudes, motivation), have been discussed as potential explanations for the differences that have been observed in the retention and college completion rates for students across the United States (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Harrington & Fogg, 2009). Chapter 2 discusses what is known from the research literature. That is, a discussion about factors that have been reported as those that influence the completion rates of students. After the discussion about the theoretical framework used for the planned study, the remaining sections of this chapter discusses research as related to the focus of the study, namely, the relationship between families and schools, academic advisement, mentoring, students' attitudes, motivation, and cultural influences.

Theoretical Framework

Research in retention within higher education indicated student involvement with campus life leads to heighten incorporation of the social and academic processes of the institution and stimulates retention (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Pike & Graunke, 2014; Tinto, 2006). This finding is particularly relevant for first-year students (Miles, 2014). It is interesting to note Tinto (1987) a renowned educational researcher, provided similar insight about the direction on which schools and educators should focus their attention 28 years ago. Tinto (1987) was explicit. He explained that leaving the school served as a barometer of the school's intellectual and social health, as well as the experiences of the student while in college. According to Tinto (1987), two critical factors influenced the attrition rates of students, that is, students' integration in the school and the quality of the interactions between the faculty and the students. Additionally, Tinto (1987) suggested

that schools needed to look at the specific features of their retention plans. For instance, he said that schools needed to assess the timing in which the college plans to intervene as well as the variations that will be needed in policies for different types of colleges and students. Essentially, Tinto (1987) suggested that "effective retention lies in the college's commitment to students" (p. 223).

Students face many challenges in the completion of the requirements for graduation (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Miles, 2014). McDaniel and Graham (2001) reported that students are leaving school at the end of their freshman year at alarming rates. As indicated previously, the problem is even more pronounced among African American college students (Lynch, 2014). There are things that are under the control of the school, for example, situational factors (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). Similarly, Baron and Branscombe (2012) presented research that showed there are also factors that are under the control of the students and or their families, for example, personal factors.

Self-Motivation

One aspect of this study focused on motivational factors that could influence students' behavior as they matriculate through the college. It is believed a student's level of motivation or what motivates a student could serve to determine the type of assistance a student needs. Briefly, classic theorists concluded that when people are motivated, they are driven to engage in some type of behavior (Atkinson, 1983; Bandura, 1977, 1986; McClelland, 1987; Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2013). Bandura's (1977, 1986) self-efficacy model could help explain how students' motivation would have a direct impact on their behavior. Years of research led Bandura to the development of this concept in his social-cognitive approach, which is commonly referred to as his perspective on the social learning theory.

Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief that she or he can accomplish his or her goals (Bandura, 1977, 1986). In Bandura's terminology, self-efficacy is an assessment of a person's expectation about his or her success in any given situation. If the person's self-efficacy level is low, Bandura would predict that because the person does not believe that he or she would succeed, then he or she is less likely to engage in the task or even persist. That is, when problems or difficulties occurred, the person with a low level of self-efficacy would be expected to give up easily on any efforts to succeed (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2013). This level of motivation is a personal variable that could make the difference between success and failure (Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2013).

Motivation has been conceived in different ways. For instance, some theorists have conceived it as an instinct, drive, and as physiological arousal (Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2013). No matter how it is described, the result is the same; people have to be motivated to respond in any given situation. The self-determination theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs are two theories that have also been used to explain an individual's pursuit of basic needs and how people are motivated by different things (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Maslow, 1970). This line of research would suggest that when students are intrinsically motivated to do well in school, the probability for positive outcomes would increase. Brief overviews about these theories as related to the interest of the study are subsequently described. In this instance, the behaviors would be those that lead to the attainment of the degree.

Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2008) helped advance the acceptance of the self-determination theory. According to the self-determination theory, different things

motivate different people (Deci & Ryan, 2008). These researchers explained that different types of motivation can originate within the person (internal) or from his or her social world (external). This theory supports the assumption that both autonomous (i.e., internal or intrinsic) motivation and controlled (i.e., external or extrinsic) motivation can influence whether or not an individual pursues (or continues to pursue) a specific goal. The self-determination theory contends there are three needs a person is motivated to fulfill (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Deci and Ryan (2008) described these needs as the need to feel competent, autonomous, and related to others. This means people had a need to feel as though they were skilled in some facet of their lives (i.e., competent), had control of their own behavior (i.e., autonomous), and were connected with other people (i.e., related). Following that line of reasoning, it could be predicted that a student who is pursuing a degree in higher education because he or she wants to attain his or her career goals (i.e., feel competent) is more likely to complete the requirements for the degree than would a student who is attending college to please his or her parents (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In the former case, the student would be described by Atkinson (1983) as being intrinsically motivated and the student who wants to please his or her parents is extrinsically motivated.

Even pioneer researchers in the field of learning discovered that in order to change the behavior of people (or any living organism), you would need to know what motivates them (Skinner, 1953; Watson & Rayner, 1920). Skinner (1953) showed how reinforcement (i.e., rewards) could increase the likelihood that a behavior would be repeated. Watson and Rayner (1920) showed how conditioned emotional responses could occur, such as establish an association between doing well in school with a positive

emotion and the probability of the students' success would increase.

Overall, the research literature indicated that intrinsic motivation (e.g., feeling a sense of accomplishment) may lead to better outcomes than extrinsic motivations, for example, external rewards such as money when you earn an A in school (Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005; Rockafellow & Saules, 2006; Shamloo & Cox, 2010). Shamloo and Cox (2010), as well as Rockafellow and Saules (2006), reported data that confirmed when students were intrinsically motivated to attend school, they were less likely to use alcohol or other drugs. Results from the Lepper et al. (2005) study revealed that students who were intrinsically motivated did better in school than did their extrinsically motivated peers. The point is, self-determination theory helps others recognize and understand that different things motivate different people and at different times. Schools will not be able to find one solution that would serve the needs of all students. This belief was further illustrated by Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory, which is subsequently discussed. Even though this theory is somewhat controversial, it is generally accepted and is used in different settings, in particular in the business setting (Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2013). Marketing is an area that illustrates the idea that people can be motivated by different needs. In addition, managers have learned how to apply different aspects of Maslow's theory in a way that helps them deal with their employees.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow (1970) believed some motives were stronger than other motives, and, in fact, he proposed there is a hierarchy of needs that would influence behavior. The most basic needs revolved around physiological needs according to Maslow. He explained that the need for food, drink, and warmth would have to be satisfied before the individual

would be motivated to satisfy any of the other needs. Ultimately, Maslow argued, people have a desire to become self-actualized. *Self-actualization* was defined as a need that motivates people to reach their full potential as human beings (Maslow, 1970). As shown in the figure, in order to become self-actualized (or reach transcendence), the individual would first have to satisfy the needs hierarchically, meaning that fulfillment of the needs would move from the most basic that is, hunger, thirst, warmth, and so forth (physiological needs), at the bottom and then subsequently evolve to the top (i.e., needs for safety, belongingness, and esteem).

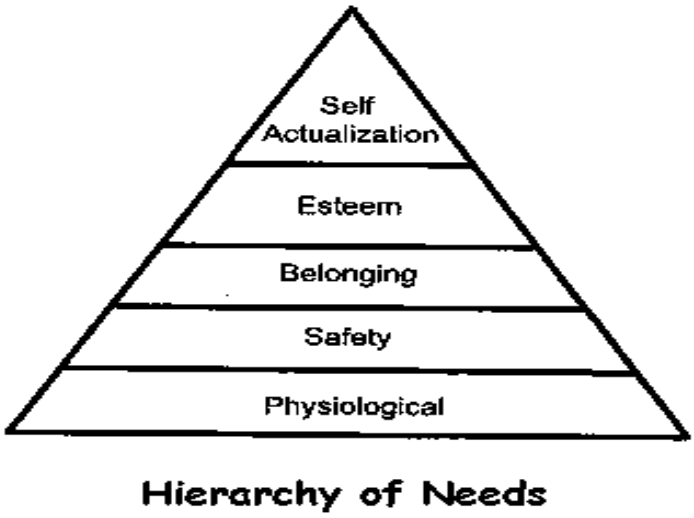

Figure. Maslow's needs hierarchically arranged.

It is suggested here that schools attempt to apply different aspects of Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory in their plans to motivate students to persist in their efforts towards the attainment of a degree in higher education. For example, students could be made aware of the fact that the degree in higher education could help fulfill several of Maslow's needs as addressed in his hierarchy of needs theory.

A Different Perspective to Improve College Completion Rates

In contrast to the aforementioned theories, which focus on the different ways

people are motivated, Tinto (2006) argued against focusing on what he called the victims of low completion rates. According to Tinto (2006), 4 decades of research in this area has evolved from focusing exclusively on students' attributes (i.e., individual differences) that influence student retention to complex models that consider the sociological, psychological, and economic influences. Tinto (2006) noted, "The results [have] been an ever more sophisticated understanding of the complex web of events that shape student leaving and persistence" (p. 1). He believed that attention should be more on what helps students decide to stay in school rather than why they leave. Tinto (2006) concluded that there were three challenges in this area of research that would need to be addressed to help institutions become more effective in the improvement of retention and graduation rates: (a) institutional action, (b) program implementation, and (c) promoting the success of low income students. These challenges are subsequently discussed.

As explained by Tinto (2006), research that focused on institutional action would help identify what schools can do to help the students, in his words, "turn theory into action" (p. 10). Program implementation involves the process used to identify effective actions that schools could take that would serve to enhance student retention. His thoughts were that it was not helpful to have an idea about what works without developing a way to implement the idea. Finally, there is a persistent challenge to help promote academic success for students from low income backgrounds. For instance, research has shown students from low income backgrounds are less likely to attend 4-year colleges than 2-year colleges (Tinto, 2006).

It is therefore possible for vocational and technical schools to identify strategies that would attract students from low income backgrounds to their institutions. Tinto (2006) proffered, "There is less socioeconomic diversity than racial and ethnic diversity

at most selective colleges and universities" (p. 11). Tinto (2006) concluded that research continues to be needed given that most of the research in the past focused on (a) the majority culture, (b) quantitative studies, and (c) residential universities. The study could obtain findings that would help fill a gap in the research literature. The remaining sections in this chapter are used to explain how educators in higher education can implement specific practices that would serve to influence positively persistence and graduation in higher education.

The Relationship Between Families and Schools

Largely, children learn the value of education from their parents or primary caretakers (Shaffer, 2009). Shaffer (2009) concluded that the most important function of the family is to socialize and care for their children. Specifically, Shaffer stated, "Socialization refers to the process by which children acquire the beliefs, motives, values, and behaviors deemed significant and appropriate by older members of society" (p. 370). Parents have a major impact on the developing child and can help their children become achievement oriented, and appropriately autonomous. Collins and Steinberg (2006) reported that autonomy support from parents is most effective when parents teach their children how to make decisions. One of the best ways to make this happen would be to give the children choices and help them discover alternatives so they can decide what is best for them. In this manner, it is believed parents foster a sense of self-determination when the children are allowed to resolve their personal issues when parents are able to offer acceptance, support, and guidance that are neither too relaxed or too restrictive (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006).

Shaffer (2009) described other institutions (e.g., religious, schools, children's groups, and mass media) as those that often supplement the support and training children

receive from their families. After an extensive review of the research literature, he concluded the school is second to the home in terms of being able to influence the children's development. A logical conclusion is that the relationship between the family and the school would impact children's attitude and expectations about the school. Indeed, findings from the study conducted by Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, and Mann (2003) showed that, when parents are highly involved in school activities, parent-teacher association meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and so forth, their children tend to do well in school and feel confident about being able to overcome academic challenges. Because of consistent findings that show parental involvement is important to the children's success in school, more schools are involved in practices that encourage participation of the students' parents (Lightfoot, 2001; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007).

Oyserman et al. (2007) stated that parental involvement in the school has consistently been shown to be positively related to high grade point averages, low absences, and higher graduation rates from high school. These researchers speculated that parents communicated the importance of school to the students when they were involved and could help the students make the connection between positive student outcomes and future career goals. In order for the students to continue the pursuit of higher education, they will need support from their family and friends (Taliaferro, DeCuir-Gunby, & Allen-Eckard, 2009). It is believed students who have parental support are more likely to complete the requirements for graduation in higher education than are students whose parents or primary caregivers are not supportive of their educational pursuits.

Furthermore, current research suggested that, contrary to past beliefs and stereotypes, urban African American families were just as motivated to be involved in

their children's education as other families and were not the uncaring or disinterested individuals they had been portrayed (Huang & Mason, 2008). Findings such as these should inform educational leaders in higher education. Practices and policies could be implemented to involve parents of students in higher education in appropriate ways that would help students attain academic success.

This speculation received support from the work conducted by Savage (2008) that made a case for parental involvement in higher education. It is a generally held belief that during late adolescence, young people are beginning to separate themselves from their family, and perhaps it is not wise to have parents involved in the educational pursuits of the college student. However, as pointed out by Savage, these beliefs are not grounded in facts. It is now believed that when students leave home to enroll in college, the existence of a supportive home base enhances the development of autonomy and competence rather than interferes with this process. There are trends that have helped explain why the relationship between parents and college students of today has evolved in the manner that has been observed in modern times.

For instance, most college students in the United States live at home (Savage, 2008). In addition, these students are most likely working, attending class, and continuing to spend time with their family. Another change identified by Savage (2008) is that due to the increasingly high cost of education, parents are more involved in financing their children's college education than in the past. Savage also noted that communication between parents and their progeny is easy and not expensive even if they are in different states. Examples include opportunities for long distance calling on the cell phone because there is no extra charge, emailing and texting opportunities, as well as face-to-face interactions on the computer. Modern technology has made communications easy and

affordable. Data also suggested that, due to the competitive nature of academics and career advancement, students are turning to their parents more for support and guidance than to their peers, according to Savage. Savage stated that "since parents are, indeed, involved in their college students' lives and students both accept and expect that involvement, colleges and universities are wise to plan intentionally for parental involvement for the benefit of students, parents, and the institution" (p. 3).

According to Savage (2008), parents can be a positive influence in higher education when they (a) are aware of resources on campus and are able to understand the educational experiences of their sons or daughters; (b) support and understand the college's goals for students' learning and development; (c) are able to distinguish between the times to step in to help their sons or daughters from those times when they need to empower them to take responsibility for their lives; and (d) support the institution and higher education, participate in events on campus, and help other parents understand the experiences their sons or daughter encounter on campus.

Most importantly, and germane to the focus of the study, is the finding that suggests parents play a role in the retention of their young adolescents (Roarty, 2007; Savage, 2008). For instance, they can encourage their offspring to work harder to overcome challenges when they inevitably call home to complain or they could tell their offspring to return home if they are not certain about the capabilities of the institution to meet the students' needs. Conversely, parents are aware of the resources on the campus, and understand that problem solving is a healthy part of growth and development, they could encourage their offspring to persist in the completion of the requirements for their degree.

Furthermore, parents can help in the fund-raising activities of the school either by

making donations directly or helping the school identify donors. There are many benefits for parental involvement and minimal cost for the institution. As reported by Savage (2008), the benefits include “recruitment, retention, and student success, along with the potential for financial returns” (p. 4). Some schools have made specific efforts to maintain and enhance parental involvement because of the known benefits (Savage, 2008). The next section in this chapter is used to present research that assessed the impact of academic advisement on positive student outcomes.

Academic Advisement

Academic advisement refers to the formal process in which the student receives care and concern from an experienced professional who can help shape a student’s college experience (Williams Sy, 2013). Advising is a dynamic process in which students can receive critical information they need to make the most important decisions they have to make about college. Some of the decisions would revolve around choices such as those affecting academic majors, career goals, courses, secondary fields of study, cocurricular activities, and life planning (Steen et al., 2013). As explained by Williams Sy (2013), academic advising could lead to positive student outcomes, such as increase the probability of academic success, enhance persistence, improve retention, and resolve any remediation concerns or special needs.

Williams Sy (2013) conducted a social organizational analysis on the role of academic advisement at a university in Liberia. As indicated, the assumption made by these researchers was that effective academic advisement could positively influence college experiences, long-term benefits, and academic success. A qualitative study was designed with the use of an ethnographic case study. The researchers interviewed students, faculty, and staff. A total of 20 students, nine faculty, and 10 staff were

interviewed. Participants were asked about their perspectives on the organizational role of advising, as well as their college experiences, academic progression of the students, and culture before and after the school established the Student Academic Advisement and Career Counseling Center. Attention was given to freshmen and seniors.

Williams Sy's (2013) study was designed to fulfill three purposes: (a) identify the role of advisement in higher education in the setting of Liberia, (b) understand the relationships between advising interactions and social organization, and (c) explore the application of approaches to advisement in a non-Western culture. As expected, the researchers stated the findings from the study indicated that the setting in which the behavior occurs is important. For instance, Williams Sy found that the challenges higher education faced in Liberia, and at the university, had served to shape both the opportunities and the barriers in the college student experience and in the role of advising. Just like in the United States and other countries, educators in developing countries such as Liberia are also trying to identify ways that would help:

1. Inspire social consciousness.
2. Improve experiences in education.
3. Contribute to needs in the work force and national development.
4. Address concerns about rehabilitation and remediation.
5. Enhance the persistence and retention of the students in higher education.
6. Improve success in academics. (p. 303)

Williams Sy concluded that academic advisement could be a key solution to resolving these concerns.

Hendon and Jenkins (2012) designed a study to determine if the advisement program established by a high school in Alabama had an effect on student achievement.

Clearly schools have seen that special efforts will need to be made to help students make adequate progress in the schools or the students, schools, teachers, and society suffer (NCES, 2013). The school that served as the setting for Hendon and Jenkins' study implemented a Teacher Advisement Program and a Get on Track program in an effort to help the school meet the expectations of the state. The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the Teacher Advisement Program and the Get on Track program on academic achievement. Findings from the study suggest some positive aspects of both programs. Hendon and Jenkins indicated more research was needed.

Other researchers have also suggested that academic advisement could play an important part in the retention and graduation of the students (Grosling & Heagney, 2009). In addition, there is marked interest in finding ways to improve academic advising to increase retention and graduation rates among first-year students (Pike & Graunke, 2014). According to Grosling and Heagney (2009), retention is a concern for institutions of higher education around the world. Furthermore, it is of particular concern for those students who could be categorized as at risk. Information is needed about the advisement process at the school where this study was conducted. The plan would be for the academic advisement programs to lead to improved retention rates. Concentration on expanding resources and services for first-year students has also been a hot topic on college campuses over the course of the last 20 years (Blair & Raver, 2014; Grosling & Heagney, 2009; Harrington & Fogg, 2009; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005).

The focus of this research was on the importance of academic advisement and the role it plays in retention and graduation. Some students are not as confident and resourceful as others when it comes to the fulfillment of their educational goals and would therefore need assistance (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Academic advisement has

been identified as a valuable resource to help students attain their goals. Retention and graduation rates are often used to rate the quality and effectiveness of colleges and universities (Schreiner, 2014). Some schools fare better than others in student retention, which would directly influence students' graduation rates (Hendon & Jenkins, 2012). Schools continue to seek ways to improve the retention and graduation rates (Pike & Graunke, 2014). According to Pike and Graunke (2014), "Retention and graduation rates are an important part of college-search web sites and accountability systems, and they frequently have been used as indicators of institutional quality and effectiveness" (p. 20).

Other factors that have been shown to influence the educational progress of the students are presented in the remaining sections of this chapter. Mentoring will be discussed next. This discussion will be followed by information available as related to students' attitudes and academic achievement. Then, available research on cultural factors that may influence the progression of the students in education is presented. The last section of this chapter includes a summary that also outlines the research questions this study was designed to address and the hypothesis that will be tested.

Mentoring

Mentoring has been defined as deliberate attempts to pair two (or more) individuals to help with many different aspects of development (Steen et al., 2014; Thompson & Vance, 2001). Mentoring can be natural (e.g., friends, teachers, colleagues, etc.) or planned, that is, specific programs designed to pair individuals one-on-one (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). According to Thompson and Vance (2001), little research has been conducted that assessed the influence of mentoring on the academic achievement of students. These researchers designed a study that assessed the academic achievement of at-risk boys who had mentors and those who did not have mentors. Findings showed that

boys who had mentors made significantly higher gains academically than did their counterparts without mentors. Mentoring has been shown to help individuals in many different ways (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015).

Rios-Ellis et al. (2015) discussed the achievement gap between Latino students and other ethnic minorities. These researchers developed a program that was designed to provide peer support, links to student and academic services, and tutors to help improve student outcomes for Latino students. Results showed the mentoring program had a positive effect on the academic performance and graduation rates for the students. It is possible that mentoring could serve to improve retention and graduation rates of students who attend a technical college located in middle Georgia.

Studies conducted to identify barriers and success factors for students in 2- and 4-year colleges revealed information that was consistent with the findings from Rios-Ellis et al. (2015). For instance, Goncalves and Trunk (2014) looked at the obstacles to success for nontraditional students in higher education. First, their literature review revealed that success rates and retention at 2- and 4-year institutions were correlated positively with student engagement in the school. That is, the higher the students' level of engagement in the school, the higher the success and retention rates. When these researchers conducted a qualitative study at their school, findings showed the lack of a liaison, which was described as the role of a mentor, and the lack of a nontraditional student organization were identified as obstacles for nontraditional students' academic success. These students also reported that they had (a) feelings of isolation, (b) received less attention from the school to help with their specific needs than did the traditional students, and (c) experienced the inflexibility of the administration in special circumstances. This study helped the researchers identify obstacles to students' progress in the school in which they

worked. As explained by Goncalves and Trunk, the next step was to identify specific programs that could meet the needs of their nontraditional students.

According to Hunter and White (2004), academic advising, well developed and appropriately accessed, is perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult (i.e., mentor) who can help them shape such an experience. These researchers also suggested that under the guidance of an academic adviser, students can (a) clarify the purposes of their participation in higher education, (b) achieve vital personal connections with mentors, (c) plan for the future, (d) determine their role and responsibilities in a democratic society, and (e) come to understand how they can achieve their potential.

Similar findings were reported by Xiong and Lam (2013). These researchers attempted to identify success factors and barriers for Hmong students who attended colleges in the United States. Xiong and Lam interviewed five Hmong students at the graduate level. Academic, cultural, and financial barriers were identified. Supportive factors for their academic, cultural, and financial needs were reported as follows: "Professors, advisors, classmates, academic support programs, family, financial aid, and their own psychological resources" (Abstract).

As indicated previously, professors and academic advisors could be the only mentors who are available for the students (Hunter & White, 2004). It is speculated these professionals can develop a relationship with the students so the students know they have support outside of the classroom (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Xiong & Lam, 2013). Special efforts would have to be made to students who do not fit the norm, for example, race or ethnicity, nontraditional students, or students with disabilities (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015).

Students' Attitudes: Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Components

Allport was a trail blazer in the research area of attitudes (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). A classic line of research by Allport (1935) led him to operationalize the concept of attitudes that is still used and understood today. Allport defined an *attitude* as a "mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon an individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related" (p. 810). The simple explanation from this definition is that an individual's attitude towards a person, place, or thing would influence how he or she felt (i.e., affect), thought (i.e., cognitive component), or acted (i.e., behavioral component) toward the attitude object. This definition also acknowledges that attitudes exert a dynamic influence on the individual's response to the attitude object and all situations and objects that are related to that attitude object.

It would logically follow that a student's attitude toward school (e.g., classmates, teachers, environment, learning, etc.) would be expected to have an effect on his or her performance in the school. Research also suggested that attitudes that were formed as a result of direct experience are more difficult to change than attitudes learned in other ways (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). An assessment of students' attitudes could help provide an understanding about their performance expectations and behaviors in the school.

Because it is believed that education is the key to the children's success, it is sometimes surprising to find that not all students hold a positive attitude towards school or the attainment of a degree in higher education (Huang & Mason, 2008). All stakeholders need to understand how to serve the students best in their academic progression. It has been determined that it is critical for educators and researchers to

identify and understand students' attitudes towards school specifically, and education in general. Williams Sy (2013) concluded it is also important the attitudes of both the parents/primary caregiver and teachers are assessed, as well as the attitude of the university toward the students, such as its practices, policies, and programs for the students.

A case in point was a study developed by Beaverson (2014) and Miles (2014). Miles conducted a study in an attempt to understand the value of the lived experiences of student athletes in college. Findings showed some attributes were likely to increase the college athletes, such as (a) intrinsic motivation, (b) attitudes, (c) academic and social integration, (d) a direct correlation between educational attainment and employment, and (e) importance of obtaining a college degree. Finally, Beaverson's research highlighted the need for institutions in higher education to take a proactive stance, in particular those that are 2-year schools. According to Beaverson, even though some community colleges are experiencing increases in enrollments because of online education, the success rates and retention of the students continue to decline. Collaborative efforts are needed to ensure purposive actions are taken in a timely and effective manner that is designed to ensure America's future by educating its students today (Beaverson, 2014).

Cultural Factors

America has been described as a melting pot that has a diverse citizenry (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). Just like other students, African Americans enter institutions of higher education with cultural habits instilled from their families, environments, religion, and previous experiences with teachers (Cuyjet, 2006). These cultural habits could foster negative, neutral, or positive attitudes towards education. For instance, African American males are often influenced by peers to disdain academic accomplishments and have little

value for fostering teacher-student, classroom interaction (Cuyjet, 2006; Jairrels, 2009). These type beliefs could have a negative impact on retention rates if appropriate strategies are not utilized.

On the other hand, Lynch (2014) reported that finances were the primary reason African American and other students dropped out of college. Juxtaposed to this concern is the notion that a large number of African American students are first-generation college students, low income, and eligible for the Pell Grant (Mercer & Stedman, 2008). The concern is that these students may have no understanding of the collegiate process. As a result, they do not return for the second year because they are detached from the collegiate experience (Beaverson, 2014; Jairrels, 2009). The freshman year for many students is the most challenging but when you consider students of color, it seems they are more vulnerable than their Caucasian American counterparts (Beaverson, 2014; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Pike & Graunke, 2014; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Students from low income families have also been shown to have low admission and retention rates in four year colleges (Tinto, 2006).

Kozlowski (2014) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and concluded these differences were explained by three theories: (a) oppositional culture, (b) cultural capital match/mismatch theory, and (c) teacher bias. Oppositional culture theory helps to understand when and how students could resist the expectations, standards, and norms for academic achievement. Cultural capital match/mismatch theory explains how teachers and students do not hold the same perception about the norms, expectations, and standards required for positive student outcomes.

Finally, Kozlowski stated the teacher bias theory would predict that teachers hold or have expectations, norms, and standards that would be advantageous for some students

and a disadvantage for others. Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) classic research led to the development of the theory called the self-fulfilling prophecy or the Pygmalion effect, which would explain how a bias on the part of the teacher could impact student learning. Rosenthal and Jacobson manipulated the teachers' expectations about their students. They found that teachers who were told that they had "late bloomers" in their classrooms tended to interact and engage these students in the learning process more than they did students who were not identified by the researchers as late bloomers. Data collected showed the teachers' expectations influenced their attitudes and behaviors towards the students and resulted in higher academic performance for the students who were identified as late bloomers.

Persistence in college for all students could serve to help the nation reclaim and maintain its prominent status around the world (Change the Equation, 2010; Lynch, 2014). The focus of this study was on information that was collected from both academic advisors and students enrolled in a technical school located in Georgia. The goal was to identify and understand factors that help students stay in school, persist, and complete the requirements for their degree. Modern society demands that America has a work force that can respond appropriately to the advances in technology and in an international society.

Summary

Students enrolled in the school setting for this research are not attaining positive outcomes at the expected rate. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) concluded that some students will need assistance to succeed. If factors that influence students' retention, persistence, and completion rates are identified, then specific prevention and intervention strategies can be developed based on sound research with theoretical support. It is believed that

research can help educators and students attain positive outcomes. America can only succeed if today's students and future generations are able to maximize their potential. Information was presented and discussed as related to factors that had been identified as those that would have a positive and negative effect on academic attainment. Specifically, areas of discussion included research related to (a) theoretical support that provided the rationale for the study; (b) factors that influenced college completion rates; (c) the relationship between families and schools; (d) the relationship between families and schools, academic advisement, mentoring, and students' attitudes; and (e) cultural factors.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influence college completion rates (i.e., graduation rates) of students who attend a technical college located in Georgia. This study was designed to collect information that could be used to respond to three research questions. The specific research questions that guided the development of this study are as follows:

1. What are the academic advisors' perceptions about factors that influence their students' college completion rates?

2. What are the specific barriers (i.e., background, financial, academic, and social) to college completion rates as reported by the students?

3. To what extent do the advisors and students identify the same or different barriers to completion rates?

The researcher collected data using (a) focus groups of academic advisors on campus (i.e., Research Question 1); (b) survey that directly assessed the students' level of agreement in four domains, that is, background, financial, academic, and social (i.e., Research Question 2); and (c) information from the focus groups with the advisors and

the survey administered to students (i.e., Research Question 3). Once the barriers to completion rates had been identified by the advisors, and the barriers identified by the students, the goal was to determine if the two groups reported the same types of barriers or different barriers that affected the completion rates. The next chapter is used to delineate the specific methods that were used to conduct the investigation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence the college completion rate (i.e., graduation rate) of students who attend a technical college located in Georgia. Information gathered from this research will enable the researcher, teachers, staff, policy makers, and educational leaders to develop programs that will help them to serve the specific needs of the students. The researcher endeavored to understand the problem through qualitative and quantitative research methods. Furthermore, demographic information was collected from participants (i.e., academic advisors and students). These data were used to provide a description of the sample. Information is reported in group form only. In this chapter, the researcher described the study's participants, instruments, procedures, research design, data analysis, and limitations that had been identified.

Participants

The participants for this study were academic advisors who were employed at the setting for the research and students who are enrolled at the institution. There were approximately 54 academic advisors on the campus in which this study took place. Students who met the criteria for selection (i.e., cleared for graduation or graduated) were randomly selected for participation. The age range of the students was 18-44 years of age. Sixty-five percent of the students were female and 35% were males. The majority of the students enrolled in the school were African American (52% or n = 6,381). Racial and ethnic compositions of the other students were as follows: Caucasian American (41.3% or n = 5,034), American Indian (n = 26), Hispanic or Latino (n = 302), Native Hawaiian (n = 6), two or more races (n = 126), and 18 of the

students did not report their race or ethnicity.

The researcher used purposive sampling procedures (Creswell, 2009; Jorrin-Abellan, 2014). Purposive sampling procedures have been described as a subset of the population being studied that serves a specific purpose or need (University of California, 2015). The focus is on a specific targeted group. In this instance, the targeted group was students who had been cleared for graduation (i.e., on track) or who had graduated with a degree, diploma, or technical certificate program. Academic advisors were randomly selected and given an opportunity to volunteer for the study. One-hundred students and 30 academic advisors were given the opportunity to participate in this study.

Instruments

The data for this study were collected in two ways. First, small focus group sessions were planned for the academic advisors. Interview questions adapted from past research were identified that would obtain information to respond to Research Question 1 (see Appendix A). Past research guided the development of the questions that were used to generate discussions in the focus groups with the academic advisors. For example, Goncalves and Trunk's (2014) results focused on the obstacles that hindered the success for students. Harrington and Fogg's (2009) research also explained the problems of retention for students in college. Research conducted by Steen et al. (2014) informed the researcher about the ways counselors helped their students achieve success. Because of findings such as these, the researcher developed open-ended questions to stimulate the discussions with the advisors to obtain information that could be used to address the needs of the students enrolled in the school that served as the setting for this study.

As indicated earlier, the researcher developed open-ended items to generate discussions among the advisors in the focus group sessions. Creswell (2012) asserted that

focus group interviews are used to obtain in-depth information about the lived experiences of the participants. For the purpose of this study, the researcher conducted focus-group interview sessions with academic advisors to describe their experiences with the students, as well as to identify factors they believed would have a negative and positive effect on retention and graduation rates. Academic advisors were asked to respond to eight open-ended questions adapted from past research for the semistructured interview (Creswell, 2009; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Harrington & Fogg, 2009; Steen et al., 2014). Questions were used in the focus group sessions to help the advisors recall and report, based on their experiences, barriers they observed that hindered the progress of their students, as well as factors that increased the probability of the students' success. The goal was to be able to describe the advisors' perceptions about factors that influence college completion rates (i.e., Research Question 1).

The second data collection technique involved the Survey Questionnaire for Students Cleared for Graduation or Graduated (see Appendix B). This questionnaire was used in previous research. Appendix C presents a matrix that shows the relationship between the research questions and the specific items on the Questionnaire for Students Cleared for graduation or graduated. According to Houser (2015), a survey questionnaire is used to collect a large amount of data in a short period. The survey method has four scales: nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio. Using the specific research question as a basis, the researcher developed a Likert-type scale, which is an interval measure. The researcher used the questionnaire that had been used in previous research to elicit the type of responses that would provide information for the research questions (see Appendix C). Information from this questionnaire would be used to respond to Research Questions 2 and 3.

Participants also were asked to provide demographic information for research purposes only (see Appendix A). Demographic data were only used to provide a description of the participants in the sample; for example, the average age, racial or ethnic composition of the advisors, and percentage of males and females. In addition to the focus group interview, the researcher also used the Survey Questionnaire to collect data (see Appendix B). The researcher obtained permission. This instrument was used to collect data for Research Questions 2 and 3 (see Appendix D). The survey instrument was divided into five domains: (a) background barriers, (b) financial barriers, (c) academic barriers, (d) social integration barriers, and (e) relationship with academic advisors. In order to provide support for the instrument's validity the researcher used the following steps:

1. Seek and receive input from committee chair and members.

2. Revise the items on the survey questionnaire as instructed.

3. Administer the survey to a small pilot group of students to determine the appropriateness and clarity of the items.

4. Revise the items and get it ready to administer to the participants.

The next section presents the procedures that were used to implement the research investigation.

Procedures

In order to collect data effectively, the researcher obtained permission to conduct the study from the Dissertation Committee, Institutional Review Board of Nova Southeastern University, as well as the school in which the study took place. After appropriate approvals were obtained, the study began. Recruitment of participants occurred using flyers (see Appendix E) and announcements made at regularly scheduled

meetings for the academic advisors employed by the school. Students who met the selection criterion (i.e., been cleared for graduation or graduated) were recruited and given an opportunity to participate in the study. Participants' names were not recorded beyond the documentation of their agreement to participate in the study voluntarily on the consent form. The consent forms were secured in a locked file cabinet that is owned by the researcher. Participants were given a copy of the consent form so they could have contact information for the researcher, major advisor, and the Institutional Review Board of Nova Southeastern University in the event they had questions or concerns after their participation was completed.

Focus groups with academic advisors. Academic advisors who agree to participate in the small focus groups were asked to select a time that was convenient for them. The focus group sessions occurred on the day and time selected by the participants in groups of three. Academic advisors were asked to meet in the assigned conference room in the school. Because they would have been informed about the study in previous meetings and by recruitment materials, upon arrival participants were briefed about the study again. They were also reminded about the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw any time without experiencing any penalties. The consent form was distributed and participants were given time to peruse the document and provide their signature if they agreed to participate. Participants also received a copy of the consent form for future reference. Participants were asked open-ended questions via a semistructured interview format. Focus group sessions were scheduled for 30 minutes. They were asked to describe their lived experiences with their students. They were also asked to identify factors they believed would have a negative and positive effect on retention and graduation rates (see Appendix A).

Questionnaire for students. Participants were asked to meet at a time that was convenient for them in a designated conference room or classroom in the school that had been assigned to the researcher. Upon arrival, participants were given an overview of the study, an opportunity to ask questions, and received the consent form. They were reminded about the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without experiencing any penalties. The consent form was distributed and participants were given sufficient time to peruse the document and provide their signature if they agreed to participate in the study. Students were asked to complete a student survey and rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert type scale (i.e., *strongly agree* coded as 5, *agree* coded as 4, *neither agree nor disagree* coded as 3, *disagree* coded as 2, and *strongly disagree* coded as 1; see Appendix B).

A survey was administered to participants who met the criteria for selection, that is, students who had been cleared for graduation or who had graduated and agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix B). After research participants signed and returned the consent form, the researcher distributed the questionnaire. When participants completed the questionnaire and received answers to any questions they had, the researcher thanked them and told them they were excused. Participants' names were not used. Each participant's questionnaire was coded with a three-digit number only (i.e., Research Participant 001). No information was collected that could be used to identify the participants as individuals.

Research Design

The researcher used a mixed-methods research design. According to Creswell (2012). A mixed-method design is a study that uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. This method was suitable for the research because specific in-depth

information was needed from the academic advisors about their lived experiences with the participants. In addition, information was needed in a form that would permit comparisons to be made, hence the need for a quantitative method. The survey questionnaire that was used required participants to rate their level of agreement about factors that hindered a timely graduation. The researcher used a case study. Houser (2015) explained that the case study had three purposes: "to achieve detailed descriptions of phenomena of interest, to develop possible explanations of phenomena, and to evaluate the phenomena of interest" (p. 81).

As described by Creswell (2009), the case study is the strategy that explores a process, program, activity, or individual, in-depth (Creswell, 2009). This method enabled a small number of participants to provide information through small focus group sessions with academic advisors. Extensive and prolonged engagement of the participants is expected. The outcome expected was the identification of relationships of meaning and patterns. The researcher positioned herself to collect data from academic advisors and student participants who had been cleared for graduation or graduated. The quantitative measure required that the participants complete the Questionnaire for Students Cleared for Graduation or Graduated (see Appendix B). Participants' beliefs, cognitions, and meanings were identified in the context of the research.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were obtained from the academic advisors in the focus groups. Data collected from the interviews that occurred in the focus group sessions were analyzed using appropriate qualitative data analysis. Data collected from the survey questionnaire was analyzed using the ANOVA as well as descriptive statistics. These procedures are subsequently described.

Qualitative analysis. Thematic analyses were conducted on data obtained in the small-group sessions led by the researcher with the academic advisors to identify themes obtained from the participants. The process that was used will subsequently be described in a step-by-step approach. This thematic analysis was used so the perceptions of the participants could be identified and explained in the words of the participants, or as Creswell (2012) stated, in vivo. The explicit process for data analysis that was used for the qualitative analysis are subsequently outlined (Creswell, 2012; Jorrin-Abellan, 2014). The following analyses were conducted to analyze the data and obtain information that would be used to respond to the first research question:

1. Prepared and organized the data. If participants agreed to the audio recordings, they were transcribed from the small focus group sessions. Information obtained from the responses of the participants was first organized based on responses received for each specific research question that was addressed.

2. Read and reflected. Responses were reviewed as related to the type of information the participants provided in relationship to the specific questions they answered. Reflections were made as related to the tones, impressions, and meanings shared by the participants (i.e., both academic advisors and students). An assessment was also made about the depth of information reported by the participants.

3. Thematic analysis. Organized the information into chunks (i.e., units that reflected the participant's individual thoughts) so the substance of the information was obtained. Using the specific language of the participants, information was identified and coded. Patterns and themes were presented and discussed.

4. Background information. Demographic data were collected so the sample could be described. No information was used to identify a participant as an individual.

Information was presented in group form only.

5. Data were described in narrative form. Specific quotes obtained from the participants were used to illustrate and verify the researcher's interpretations of the data.

6. Findings were organized around the specific research question. The understanding of the information, basic interpretation, and meaning shared by the participants were presented and discussed.

7. Member checking utilized and the triangulation of data. Member checking and the triangulation of data were used to ensure the accuracy of the information collected. Data obtained from the small focus groups with the academic advisors and from the questionnaire for students were reviewed for consistency or discrepancies. The researcher, to ascertain whether she had obtained an accurate assessment of what the participants said and meant, used member checking. She repeated the essence of the conversation to the participants and asked them if that was an accurate representation of what was said. This step was said to be designed to help assure or confirm the information collected was accurate and valid.

Quantitative analysis. In order to analyze data collected from the survey questionnaire, descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, standard deviation, percentages) were used to summarize the responses of the participants (i.e., students) as related to rating the barriers listed on the questionnaire. These analyses were performed with the use of the SPSS, Version 23. The probability level of $p < .05$ was used to determine if any significant differences were revealed.

Because this study used a mixed-methods research design, it was important to give attention to trustworthiness and ethics related to the qualitative data collection techniques, as well as reliability and validity for the quantitative measure (Creswell,

2009; Jorrin-Abellan, 2014). Trustworthiness, according to Jorrin-Abellan (2014), helps the researcher identify the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability about the information he or she has collected. There are specific steps as previously outlined in the description of the appropriate procedures for qualitative analysis. These were followed to maintain trustworthiness in the study. Acceptable practices in qualitative research also include the assurance of ethical standards before and after the study (Jorrin-Abellan, 2014).

Ethical standards were maintained so that the study had integrity. Ethical practices for research with humans were utilized. The following ethical practices were implemented: Use of informed consent, discussion of the risks and benefits prior to the implementation of the study, commitment to do no harm to the participants, provided privacy and confidentiality for the research participants, made sure the participants understood the confidential nature of the study that would be adhered before and after the study was completed, provided and maintained a trustworthy environment, did not become intrusive in any manner with the participants, maintained a professional manner throughout the study, and assure no fraudulent analysis or misinterpretations are made (Jorrin-Abellan, 2014).

Limitations

The researcher attempted to decrease any identified weaknesses from the study (Creswell, 2009). First, it was believed the findings from this study would not be generalizable to all 2-year vocational and technical schools. It was not the intent of the researcher to generalize the results beyond the targeted school and any settings and participants who shared similar characteristics as those in the sample. Although all efforts were made to ensure the findings reported reflected the actual meaning of the participants

and not the researcher, it is still possible that alternative explanations could be offered. The intent was to follow acceptable practices so that no misinterpretations or misrepresentations would occur. The Technical College embarked upon a merger that impacted the demographics of the participants. The Technical College now has multiple campuses over several counties in Georgia. The campus in which the study was conducted as well as the programs (Heating and Air, Electrical, Engineering, and Health Sciences) targeted by the Director of Advising yielded more Caucasian participants than introduced by study.

Research Subjectivity

This section is used to present information about research subjectivity (Ratner, 2002). The researcher's frame of reference and motivation to conduct the study were described. The topic investigated was one that plagues institutions of higher learning. It was believed by the researcher that it would be a good investment of time and energy to use strategies that would help determine what factors impeded these students' progress towards college completion, as well as factors that facilitate students' progress towards college completion. Experiences and exposure of the researcher with this population suggest that some students do not know about college life. If information could be obtained that would help educators understand the challenges these students face, then students could be engaged outside of the classroom so they are able to reflect and discuss their experiences. In giving students opportunities to identify factors that lead to or hinder their success, strategies can be developed to help students improve their success in higher education. Any known biases were managed and controlled as explained in the section of trustworthiness and ethical concerns. The plan called for the researcher to collect information from the participants and report it accordingly.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine factors that influence college completion rate (i.e., graduation rate) of students who attended a technical college located in Georgia. The specific problem this study was designed to address was that a large number of students were not attaining positive outcomes, that is, retention, persistence, and college completion, at the expected rate in the school that served as the setting for this study. There is a need to know what factors increase the probability of a student's success as well as know those factors that would inhibit student success. It was believed that information obtained from this study could be used to help students and educators identify strategies that would help students develop and pursue their educational goals. Colleges and universities across the United States have reported concerns about the rates of retention and persistence to graduation among their students.

The specific problem this study was designed to address was that a large number of students were not attaining positive outcomes, that is, retention, persistence, and college completion, at the expected rate in the school that served as the setting for this study. The problem was further exacerbated because the academic success of an institution of higher learning is often measured by the retention, persistence, and college completion rates of its students. Patterns from the research literature have shown that some schools have better retention, persistence, and graduation rates than others. Findings from this area of research in comparison to findings from this study will be discussed in the next chapter. The purpose of this study was to determine factors that influence college completion rate (i.e., graduation rate) of students who attended a technical college located in Georgia.

This type of information would then enable the researcher to identify factors that preclude college completion of the students enrolled in the targeted school. Data obtained from this study would help teachers, staff, and educational leaders better serve the specific needs of their students. Findings from the study could also be useful for educational policy makers and researchers. For example, information that could lead to the provision of appropriate services, resources, and personnel for the student body to improve their retention, persistence, and college completion rates.

Instruments Used to Collect Data

Two data collection techniques were used to obtain information to respond to the research questions. Specific details were discussed in Chapter 3 Methodology. For instance, open-ended items were used to start conversations among the advisors in the focus group sessions about (a) their experiences, (b) the process involved to clear a student for graduation, and (c) factors they thought helped or hindered the students completion of graduation requirements. Findings from previous research led to the development of the items that were used in the focus group sessions to help the advisors recall and report, based on their experiences, barriers they observed that hindered the progress of their students, as well as factors that had a positive influence on the progress of their students toward graduation. Specific questions for the academic advisors during the focus group sessions can be seen in Appendix A. As previously explained, past research was used to guide the development of the questions used in the focus group sessions. Qualitative data analyses were conducted.

The second instrument used in the study was the Survey Questionnaire for students (see Appendix B). This instrument was used in previous research. It was used to assess the students' perceptions in five domains: background, financial,

academic/cognitive, social, and advisement barriers to the attainment of a college degree.

The researcher used interview questions to obtain information from the academic advisors during the focus group sessions. This information was used to respond to Research Question 1. In addition to the focus group interview, the researcher also used the Survey Questionnaire to collect data (see Appendix B). Specifically, the instrument that was used to obtain data from the students about retention and persistence was expected to provide information to respond to Research Question 2. A response to Research Question 3 was composed from data collected from the academic advisors during the focus groups and the data collected from the students via the Survey Questionnaire. For example, after the barriers to completion rates were identified by the advisors and students, the data were assessed to determine if the two groups reported the same types of barriers or different barriers that they believed affected graduation rates.

This chapter is used to report the findings that were obtained from the study. Results from the data analyses are presented. Qualitative data were obtained from the advisors during the focus group sessions. Quantitative data were also obtained from the students when they completed the questionnaire with the use of the Likert-type scale provided for each item. Results are presented in relationship to the three research questions.

Findings

Research Question 1. The first research question asked, What are the academic advisors' perceptions about factors that influence their students' college completion rates? In order to obtain information to respond to this item, participants were asked to respond to eight questions during the focus group sessions. Academic advisors were asked to convene at a time that was convenient for them in the conference room that had

been assigned to the researcher. Three focus group sessions were held with three academic advisors in two of the sessions and two academic advisors in the third session. Upon arrival, participants were given another overview about the study and what was needed from them. They then returned their consent forms and were reminded about the confidentiality of the study, voluntary nature of the study, and their right to withdraw at any time without experiencing any penalties. They were also given a copy of the consent form for future reference in case they had any questions or concerns during or after their participation.

Seven academic advisors agreed to participate in the focus groups. The sex and race demographics are summarized in Table 5. There were four females and three males. Participants were asked to respond to each of the eight open-ended questions via a semistructured interview format. The first 4 questions asked the participants about their experiences as an academic advisor and how they were able to tell whether an enrolled student would graduate as scheduled.

Table 5

Sex by Race/Ethnic Demographics of the Academic Advisors

Sex	Race/Ethnicity	*N*
Male	Caucasian American	2
Male	African American	1
Female	African American	2
Female	Caucasian American	2

The last four items used in the interview were designed to elicit answers from participants that would directly address Research Question 1. These four items directed the participants to discuss, based on their experiences with the students, what they thought: (1) helps a student complete the requirements for graduation or certification, (2) hinders a student from completion of the graduation requirements, (3) could be done to retain students so they could complete the degree or certification within the expected time, and (4) about anything else they knew that would increase the retention and graduation rates at this school. The questions and results from the thematic data analyses that were performed are presented subsequently.

Experiences as an academic advisor. Each research question is addressed in the following sections.

Interview Question 1. "How would you describe your experiences as an academic advisor at this school?" Two themes emerged when participants' responses to this item were analyzed. The primary theme revealed from the participants' responses described what the advisors did, that is, how they, in the words of the participants, "helped, advised, or guided the students." Participant 1 stated, "I help students identify the courses they need to complete graduation." Participant 2 explained, "I have limited experiences but I am generally able to advise properly." Participant 5 said, "I advise and guide students about my program which helps lead them."

The remaining responses showed evidence of both the primary theme (i.e., helped, advised, or guided) that reflected the role of the advisors and the secondary theme, namely, positive feelings about the job. Responses that supported these findings are subsequently outlined. Participant 3 stated, "My experience has been rewarding; advise all undergraduates and graduate students. I love my job." Participant 4 explained

that it was a "quality experience. I promote the occupational program of the study. I feel great about doing my job." Similarly, Participant 6 explained it in the following manner:

> I am the Program Director and I advise students [in] the program. As students' progress through the program, I also advise them of when they are not doing well in their classes. If a student fails out of the program and cannot progress to the next semester, I have to advise them of this as well. I love my job and I love helping students to make the right decisions regarding college education and how to make it work in their busy lives and work schedules.

Participant 7's response also illustrated evidence of both the primary and secondary themes: "[I am] faculty in American Government, Political Science, and I advise students. Fun job most of the time."

Interview Question 2. "How would you describe your experiences with the students?" The theme that emerged from the thematic analysis that were performed on the participants' responses to this item revealed the participants described their experiences with the students as positive, for example, they connected with the students, and they were able to help them. Participant 1 stated, "I have a positive experience with students and help them reach academic and career goals." Participant 2 qualified her response by saying that even though she had limited experiences with the students, she still believed she helped them with the use of Degree Works notes and plans. Participant 3 acknowledged, "My experiences are enriching. Yes I do [help them], academically and socially." Participant 4 stated, "Quality experience. Yes, I think I help them. I help them by getting them enrolled in a program that fits them. Yes I believe [that I help them]." Participant 5 described it in the following manner: "I think overall I can relate to the students and show them a career path." Participant 6 said,

> My experiences with students have always been positive. I do feel that I am able to help them. If I do not know the answer to a particular issue, such as Financial Aid, I am able to direct them to the correct person. If a student is on Academic Probation or Academic Suspension, I have the tools to advise them of the necessary steps to get back into college and to get their classes scheduled. If a student needs help with any classes, I feel that our college has the tools for them in Academic Services and I feel comfortable advising them to go there.

Finally, Participant 7 stated, "[I] connect well with students. Give them tools to assist with degree planning."

Interview Question 3. "How are you able to determine when a student will graduate as scheduled?" The primary theme that emerged from the discussion of this question was that the use of "Degree Works helps to determine if students will graduate on schedule" (Participant 1). Participant 2 noted, "We have a plan mapping system in Degree Works." Participant 3 explained, "By keeping abreast of academic progress along with the Registrar [through the use of Degree Works]." Similarly, Participant 5 said, "Using the Degree Works planning program to see what classes they need." Also succinctly stated was the response from Participant 7, "Course completion by Degree Works." Two other participants offered another point of view, therefore, a secondary and a tertiary theme was identified. The secondary theme was being able to place students in the correct pathway of study (Participant 4). The tertiary theme that was identified as the way they could tell if a student will graduate as scheduled depended on the type of program in which the students were enrolled. Specifically, Participant 6 said,

> Our students are in a progressive program (where they must complete specific classes every semester prior to moving onto the next semester). Therefore, if a

> student fails a class they fail out of the program. All of our students graduate at the same time every year.

Interview Question 4. "How are you able to determine when a student will not graduate as scheduled?" Participants were asked to discuss how they are able to determine if a student would not graduate as scheduled. In this instance, the primary theme that emerged was the use of Degree Works for failing courses or staying on track. For instance, Participant 1 explained that "Degree Works also helps to determine if students will not graduate as scheduled." Participant 2 said, "Same response as question number three. Degree Works. Any failing grade or withdrawal prolongs duration." Participant 3 stated, "By determining if the senior audits [by Degree Works] are compliant." "Using Degree Works planning program to see what classes they need," said Participant 5. Participant 7 stated, "Failure to complete courses." A secondary theme was introduced by Participant 4. According to Participant 4, "When I do not advise them properly for the right program." The tertiary theme revealed was the type of program in which the student was enrolled. Participant 6 explained,

> Yes. Since our students are in a progressive program (where they must complete specific classes every semester prior to moving on to the next semester) the entire program faculty body knows when a failed student is not going to graduate.

To directly address Research Question 1, the academic advisors were asked to discuss questions during the focus group sessions that asked about what they thought (a) helped a student complete the requirements for graduation (or degree/certification), (b) hindered a student from completion of the requirements for graduation (or degree/certification), (c) could be done to retain students so that they could complete the requirements for graduation (or degree/certification), and (d) about anything else that

they could share about increasing the retention and graduation rates at their school. The next section details the findings from the questions related to helping and hindering retention and graduation rates.

Factors that help or hinder the retention and graduation rates. As stated earlier, Research Question was, What are the academic advisors' perceptions about factors that influence their students' college completion rates? In order to obtain information that could be used to respond to Research Question 1, the academic advisors were asked directly to discuss, based on their experiences, the factors that help (i.e., Interview Question 5) and hinder (i.e., Interview Question 6) students complete the requirements for graduation or degree certification.

Interview Question 5. This question asked participants, "Based on your experiences with the students in this school, what do you think helps a student complete the requirements for graduation (or the degree/certification) within the expected amount of time?" As shown in Table 5, five themes (also referred to as domains) were revealed. Illustrations of the responses participants made that supported each placement in Table 5 are also included.

When asked to use their experience to provide information about factors that help students' complete graduation requirements, five themes (or domains) were identified: (a) advisement, (b) academic/cognitive, (c) social, (d) financial, and (e) background. For instance, Participant 1 stated, "Students complete the requirements for graduation if they have the financial resources [financial] and a flexible work schedule [background]." In response to this question, Participant 2's response was, "Attendance, effort, concentration on his/her goals." It was determined these factors could be described, respectively, as background and academic/cognitive factors. According to Participant 3, "utilizing all

aspects of student services [academic/cognitive], as well as regularly meeting with advisors [advisement]" are factors that would help students complete requirements for graduation.

Table 6

Factors That Help Students Complete Graduation Requirements From the Perspective of the Advisors

Domain	Illustration
Advisement	Regularly meet with advisors; maintaining an open advisement for advisees throughout the semester; academic advisor assigned to help with problems or need help registering; making sure students receive advising feedback
Academic/Cognitive	Attendance; concentration on his/her goals; utilize all tools/resources at the school; utilize all aspects of student services; constant stimulated activity
Social	Getting involved in student activities that reflect their program of study that enhances leadership qualities; assign peer mentors to help students feel connected
Financial	Financial resources
Background	Effort; flexible work schedule

An illustration of a social theme was provided by Participant 4 who said, "Getting involved in student activities that reflect their program of study that enhances leadership abilities." Participant 5 stated that a factor that would help students complete graduation requirements was related to the advisor's role, "Maintaining an open advisement for advisees throughout the semester" (i.e., advisement). Participant 6 provided information

that illustrated academic/cognitive, advisement, and social themes. As explained by Participant 6,

> We have many tools at our college to help students succeed: an excellent library with helpful knowledgeable staff, an Academic Success Center where students can receive free tutoring services, an Academic Advisor that is assigned to help them when they have a problem or need help registering for classes, and college clubs and student events, Fall Festival for example, so students feel connected to the college. The first year students in our program are also assigned a second year Big Brother or Big Sister as a mentor to help them. They can go to this mentor to ask questions about the college, the instructors, the classes, and labs, and any other questions about the program.

Finally, Participant 7 said, "constant stimulated activity, and making sure students receive advising and feedback." These responses would fall within the academic/cognitive and advisement domains.

Interview Question 6. This item asked participants to discuss the following question: "Based on your experiences with students in this school, what do you think hinders a student from completion of the requirements for graduation (or the degree/certification) within the expected amount of time?" When participants' responses were analyzed, thematic analysis revealed five themes: background, academic/cognitive, financial, social, and advisement. Participant 1 reported that "Financial resources, time management skills, and [not] utilizing college resources could hinder students' progression." As shown in Table 6, the factors reported by Participant 1 can be described as financial and academic/cognitive barriers. Based on the experiences of Participant 2, factors that would hinder the progress of the students were "outside complications, work,

children, and other life situations." These factors can be described as background barriers. Participant 3 that the factors that hindered students' progression to graduation were "life un-expectancies, poor academic performance, and financial aid." These factors can be described as background, academic/cognitive, and financial barriers.

Table 7

Factors That Hinder Students From Completing Graduation Requirements From the Perspective of the Advisors

Domain	Illustration
Advisement	No formal, mandated advisement
Academic/Cognitive	Time management skills; not utilizing college resources; poor academic performance; pass rate of prerequisite classes needed
Social	Not engaged in student activities
Financial	Financial aid; financial burdens; Transportation issues
Background	Outside complications, work, children, other life situations; life un-expectancies; personal issues, no family support so they can complete college homework assignments; responsibilities of taking care of children

Participant 4 said that students are hindered from graduation completion when they are not engaged in student activities. This is a social barrier. An academic/cognitive barrier was described by Participant 5 who said, "[the] pass rate of pre-requisite classes needed." Participant 6 explained it in the following manner: "In our college, I think most students do not graduate due to personal issues, financial burdens, no family support so

they can complete college homework assignments, transportation issues, and responsibilities of children." The factors that hinder students' progression to graduation that were reported by Participant 6 are described as background and financial barriers. Finally, Participant 7 said that students were hindered from graduation completion because there is "no formal, mandated advisement." This explanation can be described as an advisement barrier.

Interview Question 7. This question asked, "In your opinion, what can be done to retain students so that they can complete the requirements for graduation (or degree/certification) within the expected amount of time?" When participants responded to this question, three themes emerged from their discussion. Participant 1 suggested orientation for both the students and their parents. Specifically, Participant 1 stated, "A student orientation to inform students of requirements and resources would be beneficial. In addition, a parent orientation would be good." Participant 2 also indicated the importance of sharing information with the students: "Purposeful advisement, which we are all working on." Participant 7 said, "Mandate student advisement at least two times a year." As seen in Table 7, the theme (or domain) that emerged from these responses was advisement.

Suggestions about the students' background were also made. For instance, Participant 3 said, "Establish programs that attract students as well as encourage student achievement." Similarly, Participant 4 added, "Get them involved in a program that ignites their passion." Finally, as stated by Participant 6,

> I think if we offered students more personal support, then they may be able to succeed better and graduate (e.g., counseling). Although our college receives a lot of federal government funding to help students and this is usually an option for

most students who need financial assistance, and low cost day-care [is needed]. The response from Participant 6 showed that support meant personal and financial assistance for the students.

Table 8

Specific Suggestions by the Advisors to Increase Students' Rates for Completion of Requirements

Domain	Illustration
Advisement	Orientation for students and parents; purposive advisement; mandate student advisement at least two times a year
Background	Establish programs that (a) attract students, (b) encourage student Achievement, and (c) ignite their passion; more support (personal and financial)
Academic/Cognitive	Make more classes face-to-face and not online

Interview Question 8. The last question the researcher asked the participants to discuss in the focus group sessions was, "Is there anything else you can tell me about increasing the retention and graduation rates at this school?" The themes that emerged from the participants' responses, along with specific statements made by the participants, are subsequently outlined:

1. Social. Participant 1 said, "Varying methods to get students involved in campus activities would increase retention and graduation rates." Participant 3 stated, "Establish peer mentor groups. Develop living learning communities." According to Participant 7, "Connecting students besides the classroom through activities, programs."

2. Academic/Cognitive. Participant 3 stated, "Evaluating career services."

3. Background. Participant 3 said, “Enhance student success.” Participant 4 added, “Get students interested in programs that will satisfy their hunger for success.” Participant 5 explained that, “Making a student realize the diploma or degree is not just handed to them.”

4. Advisement. Participant 7 also said, “Have students assigned to a specific Academic Advisor to guide [them through the] degree/certificate program.

Two other comments were made by Participant 2 and Participant 6. Participant 2 stated that “institutional effectiveness can answer this more adequately.” Participant 6 stated that she did not have any other suggestions.

The next section of this chapter is used to describe and understand students’ perceptions about factors that would serve to increase and decrease the probability of their being able to complete the requirements for graduation. This information will be used to develop the response to Research Question 2.

Research Question 2. Research Question 2 asked, What are the specific barriers (i.e., background, financial, academic/cognitive, advisement, and social) to college completion rates as reported by the students? A survey was administered to participants who met the criteria for selection, that is, students who had been cleared for graduation or who had graduated and agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to meet at a time that was convenient for them in the designated classroom in the school that was assigned to the researcher. Upon arrival, participants were given an overview of the study, an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and received the consent form. They were also reminded about the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without experiencing any penalties. Students were asked to complete a student survey and rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert type scale

(i.e., *strongly agree* coded as 5, *agree* coded as 4, *neither agree nor disagree* coded as 3, *agree* coded as 2, and *strongly disagree* coded as 1; see Appendix B). This meant that the higher the number, the greater their agreement to the item.

The following section presents the information that was obtained to describe the students who agreed to participate in the study. After this information is presented, the analyses that were performed on the data are described. That information will be used to respond to Research Question 2.

Student demographics. Forty-seven students who met the criteria agreed to participate in the study. There were 44 males and three females. As shown in Table 9, all of the participants reported their sex, and 43 of the participants reported their race. In addition, the majority of the participants were males (93.6%), and the majority of the sample was Caucasian American (62.8%).

Table 9

Student Demographics

Demographic	No.	%
Sex		
Male	44	93.6
Female	3	6.4
Ethnicity		
African American	11	25.6
Hispanic/Latino	3	7.0
Caucasian American	27	62.8
Caribbean/Pacific Islander	1	2.3
Mixed	1	2.3

When participants were asked to indicate when they first enrolled in the school, the range was from 2008-2016. As shown in Table 10, 53.3% of the students enrolled in the academic year 2016 and 33.3% enrolled in the academic year 2015. Participants were also asked to indicate the year they expected to graduate. Two participants did not specify their academic year enrolled.

Table 10

Academic Year First Enrolled in the School

Year	Frequency	%
2008	1	2.2
2009	1	2.2
2010	1	2.2
2012	1	2.2
2014	2	4.4
2015	15	33.3
2016	24	53.3

As shown in Table 11, the majority of the sample expected to graduate in 2017 (44.7%) and 2018 (34.0%). Four of the participants (8.5%) admitted they did not know when they would graduate. Of the 47 participants, three did not specify race on the student demographic sheet for 43 total.

Participants were also asked to indicate their family's annual income, whether they were dependent and living with family, independent, or filed taxes as husband and

wife. As shown in Table 12, the range of annual income was $0-147,000 and the mean varied based on the family's filing status. Out of the 47 participants, only 31 completed the income portion of the questionnaire.

Table 11

Year Expected to Complete Requirements for Graduation

Year	No.	%
2016	6	12.8
2017	21	44.7
2018	16	34.0
Do not know	4	8.5

Table 12

Family Income

Status	*N*	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
Dependent	12	0	147,000	52,833.33	43,580.299
Independent	12	0	48,000	20,500.00	14,675.273
Married	7	24,000	120,000	43,857.14	34,187.856

Student Questionnaire

The student questionnaire is presented in Appendix B. Participants were asked to complete the survey so information could be obtained to respond to the second research

question. There were 47 items on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to measure the students' level of agreement in five areas/domains: (a) background barriers to graduation, Items 1-9; (b) financial barriers to graduation, Items 10-13; (c) academic/cognitive barriers to graduation, Items 14-22; (d) social barriers to graduation, Items 23-26; and (e) advisement barriers to graduation, Items 27-47. Participants were instructed to use the following 5-point Likert-type scale to respond to each item: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Therefore, on the 5-point scale, the higher the number, the higher the level of agreement with the item; conversely, the lower the number the lower the level of agreement with the item. Data analyses were completed with the SPSS, Version 23.

Background barriers to graduation. As mentioned previously, Items 1-9 assessed participants' level of agreement for the background domain. Results showed that the participants did not perceive their background as a barrier to graduation (see Table 13). As shown in Table 13, the only item in which the sample showed that they agreed was with Item number 9, which was "I was/am an adult student in college" (M = 4.22).

Patterns from the result showed this sample tended to disagree with the other eight items that assessed background concerns as barriers to graduation. Specifically, Items 1-8 asked participants to rate their level of agreement with statements about their (a) upbringing, (b) self-esteem, (c) lack of motivation, (d) in college to please parents, (e) not being academically prepared, (f) not interested in college, (g) not sure how college fits into their lives, and (h) intimidated by instructors.

Financial barriers to graduation. Items 10-13 assessed the participants' level of agreement with financial concerns that hindered their graduation rate. These items asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as (10)

"worked/work long hours to support my family," (11) "have/had no financial support," (12) "have/had high credit card debts and could not persist in college," and (13) "poor at managing money."

Table 13

Descriptive Statistics for the Level of Agreement With the Background Barriers to Graduation

Question	*N*	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
1	50	1.00	5.00	2.1000	1.31320
2	50	1.00	5.00	2.000	1.04978
3	50	1.00	5.00	1.9800	1.16916
4	50	1.00	5.00	1.9800	1.22040
5	50	1.00	5.00	1.8800	1.04276
6	50	1.00	4.00	1.9200	1.0691
7	50	1.00	5.00	2.0400	1.06828
8	50	1.00	4.00	1.5800	1.58000
9	50	1.00	5.00	4.2200	4.22000
Background barriers	50	9.00	35.00	19.7000	5.73656

Patterns from this sample's responses indicated they did not perceive financial barriers as a problem for their graduation. As shown in Table 14, overall, the participants tended to disagree with the items that assessed their level of concern about finances in college.

Academic/cognitive barriers to graduation. Nine items (Items 14-22) assessed participants' level of agreement with whether they believed there were academic/cognitive barriers to graduation. These items rated the level of agreement as to

whether participants agreed they (Q14) “did not enjoy being challenged”; (Q15) “had a systematic way to approach different tasks”; (Q16) “thought through problems to find out what needs to be done before acting on it”; (Q17) “evaluate the knowledge they receive for a given purpose”; (Q18) “have positive feelings about the courses”; (Q19) “have positive feelings about their major”; (Q20) “are persistent, often working long hours on projects”; (Q21) “were academically prepared”; and (Q22) “nonacademic responsibilities (social life, sororities/fraternities) hindered their success.”

Table 14

Descriptive Statistics for the Level of Agreement With Financial Barriers to Graduation

Question	*N*	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
10	50	1.00	5.00	2.9600	1.55130
11	50	1.00	5.00	2.0800	1.20949
12	50	1.00	5.00	1.7600	.98063
13	50	1.00	5.00	2.340	1.20560
Financial barriers	50	4.00	20.00	9.1400	3.30127

As shown in Table 15, the only items this sample tended to show agreement with were when they were asked if they (Q16) “thought through problems to find out what to do before they act”; (Q17) “evaluated knowledge received for a given purpose”; (Q18) “had positive feelings about the courses they take or have taken”; (Q19) “had positive feelings about their major”; and marginal agreement with (Q20) “are persistent, often working long hours on projects.” Overall, the participants in this study provided responses that indicated they did not perceive academic/cognitive abilities as a barrier to

graduation.

Table 15

Descriptive Statistics for the Level of Agreement With the Academic/ Cognitive Barriers to Graduation

Question	*N*	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
14	50	1.00	5.00	1.8400	1.01740
15	50	1.00	5.00	3.6600	1.11776
16	50	2.00	5.00	4.1200	.82413
17	50	2.00	5.00	4.0800	.72393
18	50	1.00	5.00	4.1600	.86567
19	50	1.00	5.00	4.1600	.86567
20	50	1.00	5.00	3.8800	1.02300
21	50	1.00	4.00	2.0600	.95640
22	50	1.00	5.00	2.2000	1.17803
Academic/ cognitive barriers	50	15.00	37.00	30.2200	4.10221

Social barriers to graduation. Additionally, participants were asked to assess their perceptions about social barriers that would hinder progression towards graduation. Results showed participants tended to agree with Questions 23 and 25. That is, when participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement, “I seek help with my academic work at appropriate times” (i.e., Q23, *M* = 3. 48), they tended to agree or indicate that they neither agreed nor disagreed (see Table 16). In addition, the participants indicated they agreed with Question 25 or that they neither agreed nor disagreed it, which asked, “I discuss ideas from my reading and assignments with my instructors” (*M* = 3.54). Patterns from the data also revealed two items in the social

barrier domain with which participants indicated disagreement. Patterns from the participants' responses showed they disagreed with the statements (Q24) "I feel intimidated by my instructors" (*M* = 1.62) and Q26 "I do not like working in groups with fellow students" (*M* = 2.16). The results show this sample did not feel as though there were social barriers that had a negative impact on graduation rates.

Table 16

Descriptive Statistics for the Level of Agreement with the Social Barriers to Graduation

Question	*N*	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
23	50	1.00	5.00	3.4800	1.07362
24	50	1.00	4.00	1.6200	.90102
25	50	1.00	5.00	3.5400	1.01439
26	50	1.00	5.00	2.1600	1.05676
Social barriers	50	6.00	15.00	10.8000	2.07020

Advisement barriers to graduation. Students were also asked to rate their level of agreement with advisement barriers that would decrease rates of graduation at the expected time. Twenty-one items assessed this domain (see Appendix B). Results showed that, overall, participants disagreed with the following advisement barrier items:

Question 28, "My advisor does not give me useful advice to help me graduate" (*M* = 1.94).

Question 30, "I do not feel comfortable talking to my advisor" (*M* = 1.72).

Question 35, "I feel my advisor does not connect with me on issues of my academic progress" (*M* = 2.16).

Question 39, “I do not have positive feelings about my advisor” (*M* = 2.20).

Question 41, “My advisor is not interested in my academic progress” (*M* = 2.18).

Question 43, “My advisor does not encourage me to excel” (*M* = 1.98).

Question 46, “I meet/met frequently (weekly or monthly) with my academic advisor” (*M* = 2.7).

Question 47, “I seldom (almost never) meet with my academic advisor” (*M* = 2.86).

Participants’ responses to the remaining items in the advisement barrier domain revealed that they either strongly agreed (coded as 5), agreed (coded as 4), or neither agreed nor disagreed (coded as 3) with the item (see Table 17). Participants did not express any concerns about advisement being a barrier to graduation.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was, To what extent do the advisors and students identify the same or different barriers to completion rates? Information was obtained from the perspective of both the academic advisors and the students. Participants’ responses were compared for similarities and differences. First, during the focus group sessions, academic advisors were specifically asked, “Based on your experiences with students in this school, what do you think hinders a student from completion of the requirements for graduation (or the degree/certification) within the expected amount of time?”

Results showed that the academic advisors identified factors they believed hindered a student from completion of the requirements for graduation (or degree/certification) within the expected amount of time that centered on five themes: (a) background, (b) academic/cognitive, (c) financial, (d) social, and (e) advisement. Some examples of the type of problems caused in each area were provided by the participants.

Table 17

Descriptive Statistics for the Level of Agreement With the Advisement Barriers to Graduation

Question	*N*	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
27	50	1.00	5.00	3.6600	1.15270
29	50	1.00	5.00	4.0600	1.04978
31	50	1.00	5.00	3.3400	1.00224
32	50	1.00	5.00	3.4800	.83885
33	50	1.00	5.00	3.5800	1.07076
34	50	1.00	4.00	3.6600	.91718
36	50	1.00	5.00	3.1800	1.06311
37	50	1.00	4.00	3.6800	.91339
38	50	1.00	5.00	3.7800	.88733
40	50	1.00	5.00	3.4000	1.08797
42	50	1.00	5.00	3.7200	.9905
44	50	1.00	5.00	3.6400	1.10213
45	50	1.00	5.00	3.5400	1.19881
Advisement barriers	50	21.00	77.00	64.527	9.08967

Briefly, the concerns of the academic advisors were described as follows:

1. Advisement barrier: No formal, mandated advisement.

2. Academic/cognitive barrier: Time management skills; not utilizing college resources; poor academic performance; pass rate of prerequisite classes needed.

3. Social barrier: Not engaged in student activities or activities beyond the classroom.

4. Financial barrier: Financial aid, financial burdens, and transportation issues.

5. Background barrier: Outside complications; work, children, other life situations; life unexpectancies; personal issues, no family support so they can complete college homework assignments; and responsibilities of taking care of children.

When the students were given the survey to rate their level of agreement on five barriers to graduation, none of the five were reported as a barrier by the student participants. For instance, Items 1-9 assessed participants' level of agreement for the background domain. Results showed the participants did not perceive their background as a barrier to graduation (see Table 13). In fact, the only item the sample showed they agreed with was Item 9, which was "I was/am an adult student in college" (M = 4.22).

When the students were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements about their background in the following areas (upbringing, self-esteem, lack of motivation, in college to please parents, not being academically prepared, not interested in college, not sure how college fits into their lives, and intimidated by instructors), their responses indicated they did not believe these factors hindered their ability to complete the requirements for graduation (or a degree/certification) at the school. Data analyses of information collected from the remaining four areas also showed a similar pattern. Specifically, as shown from responses on the survey administered to the students, no financial, academic/cognitive, social or advisement barriers to graduation (or degree/certification) at the school in which the study occurred were identified, while the advisors identified barriers in each area.

Chapter 5 provides a general overview of the study, along with the findings. Conclusions will also be made. In addition, implications from the findings of the study and future research are discussed. The last section of Chapter 5 presents a summary of the research.

Chapter 5: Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

Overview

Every student who enrolls in a college or university will not graduate or attain the degree or certification within the expected time frame (ACT, 2016; Bye et al., 2007; USDOE, Office of Special Education Programs, 2014; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Falasca, 2011; Tinto, 2006). After years of research, Goncalves and Trunk (2014) concluded that even though some students set goals and develop plans to achieve them, others do not make plans or fail to achieve them. The focus of this study was on obtaining information about factors that prohibit the probability of students graduating as expected from the perspective of the academic advisors and the students.

A large number of colleges and universities have had to manage the reality of high attrition rates and students' failure to graduate (Hendon & Jenkins, 2012; Yunfan et al., 2015; Schreiner, 2014). The USDOE (2015) reported higher education institutions' attrition rates as a part of the process of helping students and parents decide if they should invest in such schools. In other words, retention, persistence, and completion rates are considered vital components of an institution's academic success in higher education (Hendon & Jenkins, 2012; Schreiner, 2014). Because some schools fare better than others in managing high attrition and low completion rates, it is believed research could help higher education institutions, educators, and students increase the probability of success for the students. As such, the problem this study was designed to address was that students were not attaining positive outcomes (i.e., retention, persistence, college completion) at the expected rate in the school that was the setting of this investigation.

A mixed-methods research design was utilized to collect information (Creswell, 2012). First, academic advisors were informed about the study in regular staff meetings

and given an opportunity to participate. They were informed they would be asked to attend one small focus-group session to discuss eight questions (see Appendix A). Qualitative data were obtained from the semistructured interview data-collection technique. Attention was on their experiences as academic advisors in the school that served as the setting for the study. Secondly, students were asked to complete a questionnaire that asked them to indicate their level of agreement about factors that may hinder their progression toward graduation (or degree/certification). Quantitative data were obtained from the students with a 5-point Likert-type scale. The students were asked to rate their level of agreement in five areas that had been identified as possible barriers to college completion (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). The research questions that guided the development and implementation of this study were as follows:

1. What are the academic advisors' perceptions about factors that influence their students' college completion rates?

2. What are the specific barriers (i.e., background, financial, academic, and social) to college completion rates as reported by the students?

3. To what extent do the advisors and students identify the same or different barriers to completion rates?

Brief Literature Review

Townsend and Wilson (2006) proposed that retention rates influence a school's graduation rates. Normally, schools calculate their retention rates based on the number of first-year students who return to the school for their sophomore year (Pike & Graunke, 2014; USDOE, Office of Special Education Programs, 2014). In the context of this study, Pike and Graunke's (2014) definition of retention was applied. Pike and Graunke explained that retention in higher education institutions is evidenced when students stay

in college, vocational, or technical schools from the first time they enroll. For example, that would be from their freshmen year in college (or their first year of graduate/professional school, community college, vocational, or technical school) until they achieved their educational goals or completed the requirements for the degree or certification.

Even though an institution of higher education is evaluated based on its retention rate, for example, it is viewed as part of the measure for institutional effectiveness and quality, retention and graduation rates continue to be a challenge for some schools (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Grosling & Heagney, 2009; Pike & Graunke, 2014). For instance, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Peer Analysis tool revealed one college in Georgia reported that out of 966 freshmen, only 22% were retained by their second year. Consequently, it is important for educators to identify information and strategies that would serve to improve retention rates (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; USDOE, Office of Special Education Programs, 2014).

When facing concerns about retention and graduation rates, many areas could be considered as factors that influence these variables. Harrington and Fogg (2009) suggested that educators and researchers begin with the admissions process. These researchers concluded that enrollment in any higher education institution begins with the admissions process. Also, research has shown that what happens once the student arrives on the campus (e.g., academic achievement, mentoring), as well as what the student brings to the school (e.g., background, attitudes, motivation) all serve to influence whether or not a student will attain the degree within the expected time (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Miles, 2014). The consensus is that retention and college completion rates for students across the United States are affected by the relationship between families and

schools, academic advisement, mentoring, students' attitudes, motivation, and cultural influences (Miles, 2014).

Additionally, student involvement with campus life has been shown to help students socially and academically (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Pike & Graunke, 2014; Tinto, 2006). It was interesting to find that Tinto (1987) attempted to explain the direction educators and schools should take at least 30 years ago. He concluded two important factors would influence the attrition rate of students, namely, students' integration in the school and the quality of the interactions between the faculty and the students. He also said it would be important for schools to have retention plans and to consider specific features of the retention plan to fit the needs of the students enrolled in their schools. For example, Tinto (1987) said that schools needed to determine the timing in which the school intends to intervene and the variations that are needed in policies for different types of students and colleges. There does not appear to be a simple solution. Schools will need to identify what works best for which students in their particular school.

Help is needed. As indicated previously, the problem is even more pronounced among some students more so than others, for example, students of color in comparison to Caucasian American students (Lynch, 2014). As was seen, there are some things that are under the control of state or local governments, schools, and students and their families (i.e., situational versus personal). Theoretical support for the personal factors that could influence completion rates in higher education has been obtained from such theories as self-motivation; self-determination theory; Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory; along with other sociological, psychological, and economic influences (Lynch, 2014; Tinto, 2006).

The school in which this study took place was not attaining positive outcomes at the expected rate. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) proposed that if factors that influence students' retention, persistence, and completion rates can be identified, then specific prevention and intervention strategies could be developed based on sound research that had theoretical support. It is believed America can only be successful if its students, current and future students, are able to maximize their potential. The argument made here is that findings from research can help educators and students attain positive outcomes.

Findings

It should be recalled that this study involved collecting data from two groups of participants, academic advisors who were employed and students enrolled in the school that served as the setting for the study. Academic advisors were asked to participate so that information relevant to the study could be obtained from them based on their experiences in their role at the school. Students were asked to participate because information was needed from their perspective because they were the individuals actually affected by the phenomenon under investigation.

Academic advisors. The academic advisors were asked about their experiences as academic advisors with the first 4 questions they discussed in the focus group. The academic advisors described their role or function in the school as one that helped, advised, or guided the students. It was interesting to see that these participants reported they had high levels of job satisfaction. Research has shown that employees with high levels of job satisfaction are more likely to be effective and more productive than employees with low levels of job satisfaction (Bakotic, 2016; Cole, Cole, & Choe, 2010). Advisors described their feelings about their positions in the following way: "Rewarding," "love my job," "a quality experience," "feel great about doing my job,"

"love helping the students," and "fun job most of the time." It is clear the academic advisors felt as though they served an important role in the students' lives and that their level of job satisfaction was high.

The second interview question provided further insight into the cognitions and perceptions of the participants' experiences as academic advisors. The second interview question asked the academic advisors to describe their experiences with the students. Results showed they continued to describe their experiences with the students as positive and reported high levels of self-efficacy. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory explains how a person who believes that he or she has the skills, ability, and knowledge to do the job are more likely to be engaged in the job, persist, and successfully achieve the goal.

During the focus group sessions, academic advisors shared that they were able to connect with the students and felt positive about it because they were able to help them and provide a rich and enriching experience. It was also learned the advisors were able to determine when a student would graduate (Interview Question 3) and when they would not graduate (Interview Question 4) because the school utilized a plan mapping system. Degree Works enabled them to gauge when a student was making satisfactory progress and when they were not making satisfactory progress. It seems all of the advisors spoke favorably about Degree Works and believed the system helped them provide students with appropriate feedback.

Practical and useful information was shared by the academic advisors. For instance, one of the advisors explained that if the student is placed in the correct pathway of study, they are more likely to graduate within the expected time. Other useful information was shared by the advisors. For instance, there were three ways the advisors reported as indicators that the student would not graduate as scheduled. They indicated

they knew when a student would not graduate as scheduled: (a) by Degree Works, (n) when the students were not advised properly, and (c) the type of program in which the student was enrolled. There was one program mentioned by the advisors that indicated it is an inherent part of the program for the students to make progress because they have to enroll and successfully complete specific courses and in required sequences. It seems that the academic advisors relied on Degree Works to help them ascertain whether their students made satisfactory progress during their matriculation in the school.

The last four questions participants were asked to discuss in the focus groups asked about their opinions regarding (a) factors that would help students complete the requirements for graduation (Interview Question 5), (b) factors that would hinder a student from completion of the degree requirements (Interview Question 6), (c) what can be done to retain the students so they could complete the requirements (Interview Question 7), and (d) any additional comments they thought would increase retention and graduation rates (Interview Question 8). Overall, when thematic analyses were conducted, five themes emerged: (a) academic/cognitive skills, (b) advisement, (c) background of the students, (d) financial concerns, and (e) social interactions. These themes also emerged when the participants were asked to describe those things that could hinder a students' progression to the degree.

Research Question 1 was, What are the academic advisors' perceptions about factors that influence their students' college completion rates? First, findings from this study suggest the advisors believed they could do their job well (i.e., high levels of self-efficacy). Secondly, the advisors discussed five factors or domains that influenced the college completion rates of the students they served. These areas were described as background (e.g., family support, motivated to achieve), financial (e.g., resources to

support college expenses), academic/cognitive (e.g., decision-making capacity, requisite skills), social (e.g., positive relationships with teachers, peers, and mentors) and advisement (e.g., information needed in a timely manner, meet with advisor regularly, advisor who is skilled and knowledgeable) barriers to college completion rates for their students.

Student survey. In order to respond to Research Question 2, information was needed from students who had been cleared for graduation or graduated from the school. There were 44 males and three females who agreed to participate in the study (n = 47; three participants did not report their sex). The majority of the participants were males (93.6%), and the majority of the sample was Caucasian American (62.8%). Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements about their background in the following areas: (a) upbringing, (b) self-esteem, (c) lack of motivation, (d) being in college to please parents, (e) not being academically prepared, (f) not interested in college, (g) not sure how college fits into their lives, and (h) intimidated by instructors.

Results showed the students did not report any background barriers to their ability to graduate in the expected time frame. In fact, the only item in this domain with which the students agreed was the one that asked if they were adults in college. Similarly, when the students reported their level of agreement with the financial domain, patterns from their results showed they did not perceive any financial barriers as a hindrance to college completion. They were asked questions such as, “did they (Item 10) worked/work long hours to support their family,” (Item 11) “have/had no financial support,” (Item 12) “have/had high credit card debts and could not persist in college,” and (Item 13) “poor at managing money.” Responses from this sample showed they did not perceive financial matters as a barrier for their graduation. Overall, findings showed the participants

disagreed with the items, which assessed their level of concern about finances in college.

Similar findings were observed for the academic/cognitive barriers, social barriers, and advisement barriers. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with whether or not they believed there were academic/cognitive barriers to graduation. Specifically, their level of agreement as to whether (14) "they do not enjoy being challenged;" (15) "had a systematic way to approach different tasks"; (16) "thought through problems to find out what needs to be done before acting on it"; (17) "evaluate the knowledge they receive for a given purpose"; (18) "have positive feelings about the courses"; (19) "have positive feelings about their major"; (20) "are persistent, often working long hours on projects"; (21) "were academically prepared"; and (22) "nonacademic responsibilities (social life, sororities/fraternities) hindered their success."

As described earlier, findings showed the only items the students expressed agreement to were that they (a) thought through problems to find out what they need to do before they act; (17) evaluated knowledge received for a given purpose; (18) had positive feelings about the courses they took or had taken; (19) had positive feelings about their major; and marginal agreement with (20) were persistent, often working long hours on projects. Overall, findings from the study showed the participants in this study provided responses that indicated they did not perceive academic/cognitive abilities as a barrier to graduation. It seems as though their responses indicated they had positive and healthy attitudes toward and experiences with the same type factors with which the academic advisors expressed concern. Patterns from the data also revealed two items in the social barrier domain participants indicated disagreement. Patterns from the participants' responses showed that they disagreed with the statements (Q24) "I feel intimidated by my instructors" (M = 1.62) and Q26 "I do not like working in groups with

fellow students" (*M* = 2.16).

The results showed this sample did not feel as though they had experienced either social barriers or advisement barriers that had a negative impact on their graduation rates. For example, when participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement, "I seek help with my academic work at appropriate times" (i.e., *M* = 3. 48), they tended to agree or indicate they neither agreed nor disagreed. In addition, the participants indicated they agreed with or that they neither agreed nor disagreed when asked, "I discuss ideas from my reading and assignments with my instructors" (*M* = 3.54). Conversely, patterns from the responses made by the students revealed they disagreed with the statements, (Q24) "I feel intimidated by my instructors" (*M* = 1.62) and Q26 "I do not like working in groups with fellow students" (*M* = 2.16).

In terms of the advisement barriers, students were asked to rate their level of agreement with advisement barriers that would decrease rates of graduation at the expected time. Twenty-one items assessed this domain. Findings indicated that, overall, participants disagreed with items that conveyed the academic advisor or the relationship between the students and advisor was negative (e.g., "My advisor does not give me useful advice to help me graduate," "I do not feel comfortable talking to my advisor," "I feel my advisor does not connect with me on issues of my academic progress," "I do not have positive feelings about my advisor," "my advisor is not interested in my academic progress"). Participants did not express any concerns about advisement being a barrier to graduation.

Research Question 2 was, What are the specific barriers (i.e., background, financial, academic, and social) to college completion rates as reported by the students? Findings from this study showed that the college students did not report any barriers to

college completion or degree/certification. It could be these students, because they had been cleared for graduation or had graduated, had never encountered any barriers during their matriculation or that they had overcome any barriers they encountered. Therefore, the answer to this research question, it was determined the students did not report any barriers to obtaining their degree.

Research Question 3 was, To what extent do advisors and students identify the same or different barriers to completion rates as reported by the students. As can be seen, the advisors identified barriers that were placed in five domains: academic/cognitive, advisement, background, financial, and social. However, the students did not agree that any of the barriers they were asked to rate were barriers to graduation for them. Therefore, the participants' responses to Research Question 3 were interpreted as the advisors and students did not identify the same barriers. Specifically, although the advisors identified barriers in five domains, the students did not agree that these factors hindered their progress toward college completion when they were asked to rate their level of agreement about the statements pertaining to these domains.

Conclusions

America's future depends on its ability to ensure all of its students are able to maximize their academic potential so that it can have a viable workforce for the 21st century (Blair & Raver, 2014; Change the Equation, 2010; Hendon & Jenkins, 2012; USDOE, 2015). Educators in the state of Georgia have recognized that the future of the state depended on the ability of educators and all concerned parties to improve the performance of students in the fields of STEM. It has been projected that by the year 2020, over 60% of jobs in Georgia will require a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree (University System of Georgia, 2011). Available data from the

University System of Georgia (2011) indicated that approximately 42% of the state's young adults were prepared at those levels.

Georgia will need to maintain and enhance current graduation levels, and it also need to produce an additional estimated 250,000 graduates in the immediate future to remain competitive (University System of Georgia, 2011). Data suggest that Georgia students continue to underperform in the STEM areas in comparison to their counterparts in other states; similarly, the achievement gap (e.g., between Black, Hispanic, and White students) continues to persist in the areas of science and mathematics (Change the Equation, 2010). According to Lapayese et al. (2014), "One of the most formidable challenges is the miseducation of students of color" (p. 11). The majority of the student population at the institution that served as the setting for this study has the desire to accomplish their educational goals. At this point, based on the information from the academic advisors, some of these students need help. The challenge will become identifying who needs help, when help is needed, and how will the help be provided.

Research Question 1. The conclusions made about the findings from this study can be summarized based on each of the research questions. Based on the responses from the academic advisors, it was concluded these stakeholders believed that factors, which influenced the success and/or failure in their pursuit to complete the requirements for graduation or certification, revolved around the following five areas: (a) advisement, (b) academic/cognitive, (c) social, (d) financial, and (e) background (see Table 6).

Research Question 2. Students were also asked to rate factors they believed influenced their success or failure during their matriculation in the technical college. In direct contrast to the responses from the academic advisors, responses from the students showed they did not perceive that their progress was hindered by advisement,

academic/cognitive, social, financial, or background factors.

Research Question 3. Students' responses on the survey, which asked them to rate their level of agreement about barriers to graduation, indicated that none of the five areas were reported barriers by the students. Specifically, the students indicated they did not feel as though their background (e.g., upbringing, self-esteem, lack of motivation, in college to please parents, not being academically prepared, not interested in college, not sure how college fits into their lives, and intimidated by instructors) hindered their ability to complete the requirements for graduation (or a degree/certification). In contrast, the academic advisors reported they did believe these factors hindered students' ability to complete successfully the requirements to attain the college degree or certification. Therefore, the response for Research Question 3 is that there were differences between the academic advisors' perceptions about factors that influence the progression of students towards college completion. Simply stated, the academic advisors identified problem areas and the students did not agree these factors hindered their progress. Although there may be factors that students feel inhibit their progress towards graduation, the ratings of the factors they were asked to consider suggested they did not perceive these areas as problems.

Implications From the Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influence the college completion rate (i.e., graduation rate) of students who attend a technical college located in Georgia. Findings from other studies have shown that some students have a clear picture of what their educational goals entail and what they need to do, others are not so sure and are unaware of resources that exist on campuses to assist them in their pursuit of a degree. Based on the findings from this study, it is evident that not all students need

help, and at the same time, based on the information provided by the advisors, some students do need help. Because the overarching goal is to help students achieve their educational goals, time will need to be expended to have discussions with the students, advisors, and faculty members to identify the specific individuals who need help and when help should be offered. Ideally, students could be taught to recognize when they need help before the problem has exacerbated to the point of academic probation or even dismissal from the college. Because some researchers have reported that retention begins during the admissions process and depends on how students are integrated (or socialized) into the school, as well as the quality of the relationship they have with the faculty, collaborative efforts involving all three groups would be important (Tinto, 2006). In order for the efforts to be effective, it appears to be critical that information is obtained from all stakeholders to ensure students receive a quality education.

Furthermore, academic advising programs, established to assist students in making informed choices in their educational career, is a resource that has proven to be invaluable to students (Schreiner, 2014; Williams Sy, 2013). Unfortunately, data from William Sy's (2013) research showed that not all students have access to appropriate advisement. In some instances, it was suggested students are not aware this particular resource is available to them or that ineffective advisors are placed in positions in which they should not be allowed. Some of the students in this sample indicated they did not know the name of their advisor, and some of the advisors reported they did not currently have mandatory advisement at the school. In the context of this research, because college completion was the focus and it referred to a student's ability to either obtain an associate's degree, a certification, or diploma in this vocational school, it is clear that more information is needed from the student body. It does appear that advisement is not a

formal process in the school setting in which this study took place. It could also be a concern that the academic advisors rely on the computerized program (Degree Works) to determine whether or not students are making satisfactory progress towards college completion. Finally, the fact that faculty are not involved in the advisement process could have implications for the progress of the students as well.

Implications for Future Research

Educators, students, and staff should also be included in research to increase the probability that useful information is obtained. Although information was obtained from the students that warrant further research, it was clear from the findings for this study that more research is also needed. For instance, students were asked to rate their level of agreement for factors that had been reported as barriers to college completion. More in-depth information is needed from the student body. It would be helpful to find out what aspects of the identified barriers had caused students problems in the past, as well as how they were able to overcome them. In addition, it would also be helpful to include students in the study who had withdrawn from the school or been withdrawn by the school. There was a difference between what the advisors believed and what students reported. The reason for this occurrence should also be investigated. In order to address the needs of the students appropriately, accurate and timely information is needed. It is suggested that more qualitative research is conducted. Quantitative data alone would not reflect the depth of information needed.

Results are limited to the students and advisors who agreed to participate in the study. It could be that a wider selection of students would have obtained more information. As indicated earlier, the level of agreement was obtained from the students, now it appears essential to know why they made the choices they reported. This study has

shown the importance of conducting empirical investigations to obtain useful information. Information is needed from all parties who are involved in the education of the students. It has also been shown that it is critical those individuals who are affected by the phenomenon under investigation are included in the research process so that the validity of the information can be assessed and a complete understanding is obtained.

Summary

The problem this study was designed to address was that students were not attaining positive student outcomes during the expected time frame. Positive outcomes refer to such accomplishments as retention, persistence, and ultimately college completion at the time expected with the degree or certification earned. Burks (2014) reported the retention rate at the technical college where the study took place has continued to decrease. Educators and administrators at the school expressed concern about the need to identify factors that would preclude college completion.

Goncalves and Trunk (2014) concluded that some students would need assistance to succeed while others would not. Effective intervention and prevention strategies can be developed if factors that influence students' retention, persistence, and completion rates are identified. The need for continuous research has been made clear. For instance, the need for American educators and researchers to address the academic challenges of the students continues to be a concern for the current workforce and is even more critical for the needs of the workforce in the future. It is known that some students face challenges beyond their control, and some challenges are within the purview of the students; in either case, they would need assistance.

Overall, when thematic analyses were conducted with the information provided by the academic advisors, five themes emerged. The advisors reported that, based on their

experiences, they had observed students who were not able to graduate or graduation was delayed because of concerns related to (a) academic/cognitive skills, (b) advisement, (c) background of the students, (d) financial concerns, and (e) social interactions. With appropriate support in these areas, the chances for the students' success would increase. It was surprising to find that when the students themselves were asked about factors that influenced their progress in college, they did not report any of the factors reported by the academic advisors as deterrents to college completion. More research is needed to collect in-depth information from the students to determine their specific needs and how their needs can be met.

To recapitulate, Research Question 1 was answered because the academic advisors reported barriers that they were aware of because of their experiences with the students. However, the answer to Research Question 2 was that, collectively, the students did not identify any barriers that prevented them from graduating on time or at all. Finally, the response to Research Question 3 was that the responses from the academic advisors and the students were indeed different. It would appear the students who served as participants gave the study a new focus. There were three possibilities considered because of the findings from this study. It could be that (a) students provided the socially acceptable responses, (b) students did not believe the factors they were asked to rate inhibited their ability to graduate at the time expected, or (c) these student participants had overcome the obstacles so it was no longer a concern for them. More research is needed. In particular, qualitative research designs are recommended for the students so that more in-depth information would be obtained.

Clearly, there is a need for educators, researchers, and educational policy makers to develop collaborative efforts to identify effective methods to help students attain

positive outcomes (Change the Equation, 2010; NCES, 2013). The goal of this study was to obtain information that could be used by teachers, staff, and educational leaders better to serve the specific needs of the students. In addition, it was believed this type of information could be useful for educational policy makers and researchers. Based on the status of education in the United States, it seems imperative that educators in the schools are able to ensure the appropriate services, resources, and personnel are available for students to improve their retention, persistence, and college completion rates.

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Appendix A

Questions for Academic Advisors During the Focus Group Sessions

Questions for Academic Advisors During the Focus Group Sessions

Part A. Before we begin would you please complete the demographic sheet which asks for background information? This information will be reported in group form only.
Age _____ Sex: Male _____ Female _____ Race/Ethnicity _____
Years employed at this school _____
How long have you worked as an Academic Advisor? At this school _____ Total _____
Do you engage in any professional development activities that would maintain or improve your effectiveness as an academic advisor? Yes ___ No ___

Questions for Academic Advisors

Part B. In order to respond to research question one, participants who are Academic Advisors will be asked to respond to the following open-ended questions.

1. How would you describe your experiences as an Academic Advisor at this school? Prompts: What do you do? How do you feel about your job? [Will be used as an icebreaker.]
2. How are you able to determine when a student will graduate as scheduled?
3. How are you able to determine when a student will not graduate as scheduled?
4. Based on your experiences with the students in this school, what do you think helps a student complete the requirements for graduation (or the degree/certification) within the expected amount of time?
5. Based on your experiences with the students in this school, what do you think hinders a student from completion of the requirements for graduation (or the degree/certification) within the expected amount of time?
6. In your opinion, what can be done to retain students so that they can complete the requirements for graduation (or the degree/certification) within the expected amount of time?
7. Is there anything else you can tell me about increasing the retention and graduation rates at this school?

Appendix B

Questionnaire for Students Cleared for Graduation or Graduated

Questionnaire for Students Cleared for Graduation or Graduated*

Part A. Before we begin, would you please give us a little background information? This information is being collected for research purposes only.

Sex: Male ____ Female ____ Race/Ethnicity _____
When did you first enroll in this school? _____
When will you graduate? _____
What is your grade point average? _____

Did you have to withdraw from school after you were enrolled? Yes ___ No ___ If yes, (a) why did you have to withdraw from school? _____
_____
_____
And (b) what made you return to school?_____
_____
_____
_____

In terms of your socioeconomic level, which would you (and/or your family) belong?
Low ___ Middle ___ High _____
When you graduate what will you receive? Degree ___ Diploma ___ Technical Certification ____

Part B. Please respond to each of the following items with the scale provided.
Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree
5 4 3 2 1

Part I. Background Barriers to graduation: 1-9

1. My upbringing interfere/d with my timely graduation. _____
   Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
   Nor Disagree
   5 4 3 2 1

2. My self-esteem interfere/d with my timely graduation. _____
   Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
   Nor Disagree
   5 4 3 2 1
3. I am/was not motivated enough to graduate from college on time..__
   Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
   Nor Disagree
   5 4 3 2 1
4. I am/was in college to please my parents. ____
   Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
   Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

5. I am/was not academically prepared for college. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

6. I am/was not interested in going to college. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagre
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

7. I am/was not sure how college fits into my life. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

8. I am/was intimidated by instructors. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

9. I was/am an adult student in college. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

Part 2. Financial Barriers to graduation:10-13

10. I worked/work long hours to support my family. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

11. I have/had no financial support to attend college.____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

12. I have/had high credit card debts and could not persist in college. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 4 3 2 1

13. I am poor at managing money. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
Nor Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

Part 3. Academic/Cognitive Barriers to graduation: 14-21

14. I do not enjoy being challenged. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

15. I am systematic in the way I approach different tasks. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

16. I think through problems to find out what I need to do before I act. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

17. I evaluate the knowledge I receive for a given purpose. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

18. I have positive feelings about the courses I take/took. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

19. I have positive feelings about my major. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

20. I am persistent, often working long hours on projects. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

21. I am/was not academically prepared for college. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

22. Non-academic responsibilities (social life, sororities/fraternities) hindered my success. ____

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5 **4** **3** **2** **1**

Part 4. Social Barriers to graduation: 22-26

23. I seek help with my academic work at appropriate time. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

24. I feel intimidated by my instructors. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

25. I discuss ideas from my reading and assignments with my instructors. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

26. I do not like working in groups with fellow students. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

Part 5. Advisement Barriers to graduation: 27-47

27. My advisor gives me useful advice to help me graduate. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

28. My advisor does not give me useful advice to help me graduate. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

29. I feel comfortable talking to my advisor. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

30. I do not feel comfortable talking to my advisor. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

31. My advisor is interested in knowing what happens to me. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

32. My advisor has expert knowledge of campus issues. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

33. I feel my advisor has professional knowledge of my academic problems. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

34. I feel my advisor connects with me on issues regarding my academic progress. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

35. I feel my advisor does not connect with me on issues of my academic progress. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

36. I ask my advisor questions about my graduation issues. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

37. I evaluate the information that my advisor gives me regarding my timely graduation. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

38. I have positive feelings about my advisor. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

39. I do not have positive feelings about my advisor. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

40. My advisor is always interested in my academic progress. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

41. My advisor is not interested in my academic progress. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

42. My advisor encourages me to excel. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

43. My advisor does not encourage me to excel. ____

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

44. I was assigned an academic advisor after I enrolled in this college.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

45. I know or knew the name of my academic advisor.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

46. I meet/met frequently (weekly or monthly) with my academic advisor.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

47. I seldom (almost never) meet with my academic advisor.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND INFORMATION!

Appendix C

Original Survey for Students

Original Survey for Students

Sample Survey Questionnaire:

1. Background barriers that hinder timely graduation

    1. My upbringing interfere (d) with my timely graduation
    2. My self-esteem interfere (d) with my timely graduation
    3. I am/ was not motivated to enough to graduate from college on time.
    4. I am/was in college to please my parents
    5. I am/was not academically prepared for college.
    6. I am/was not interested in going to college
    7. I am/was not sure how college fits into my life.
    8. I am/was intimidated by instructors.
    9. I was/am an adult student in college.

2. Financial barriers that hinder timely graduation
    - I worked/work long hours to support my family.
    - I have/had no financial support to attend college.
    - I have/had high credit card debts and could not persist in college.
    - I am poor at managing money.

3. Academic barriers that hinder timely graduation
    - I do not enjoy being challenged
    - I am systematic in the way I approach different tasks.
    - I think through problems to find out what I need to do before I act.
    - I evaluate the knowledge I receive for a given purpose
    - I have positive feelings about the courses I take/took.
    - I have positive feelings about my major.
    - I am persistent, often working long hours on projects.
    - I am/was not academically prepared for college.

4. Social Integration barriers that influence timely graduation
    - Nonacademic responsibilities (sororities/fraternities).
    - I seek help with my academic work at appropriate time.
    - I feel intimidated by my instructors.
    - I discuss ideas from my reading and assignments with my instructors.
    - I do not like working in groups with fellow students.

5. Relationship with Academic Advisors
    - I meet with my advisor every week, month, …….
    - My advisor gives me useful advise to help me graduate

- My advisor does not give me useful advise to help me graduate.
- I feel comfortable talking to my advisor
- I do not feel comfortable talking to my advisor
- My advisor is interested in knowing what happens to me.
- My advisor has expert knowledge of campus issues
- I feel my advisor has professional knowledge of my academic problems.
- I feel my advisor connects with me on issues regarding my academic progress.
- I feel my advisor does not connect with me on issues of my academic progress.
- I ask my advisor questions about my graduation issues.
- I evaluate the information that my advisor gives me regarding my timely graduation.
- I have positive feelings about my advisor
- I do not have positive feelings about my advisor.
- My advisor is always interested in my academic progress.
- My advisor is not interested in my academic progress.
- My advisor encourages me to excel.
- My advisor does not encourage me to excel

Appendix D

Research Questions and Specific Items on the Questionnaire for Students Cleared for Graduation or Graduated

Research Questions and Specific Items on the Questionnaire for Students Cleared for Graduation or Graduated

Research Question 2	**Research Question 3**
What are the specific barriers (i.e., background, financial, academic, and social) to college completion rates as reported by the students? **<u>Items Number</u>: 27-47**	To what extent do the advisors and students identify the same or different barriers to completion rates? **<u>Items Number</u>:** **Background: 1-9** **Financial: 10-13** **Academic: 14-22** **Social: 23-26**

***Responses for Research Question 1 [What are the academic advisors' perceptions about factors that influence their students' college completion rates?] will be provided from the information obtained from the Academic Advisors in the Focus Group Sessions.**

Appendix E

Flyer to Recruit Research Participants

Flyer to Recruit Research Participants

ATTENTION
Students & Academic Advisors

NEEDED: Volunteers

A research study is being conducted to collect information from: (1) students about your progress to obtain your degree or certification, and (2) Academic Advisors about your work with the students. Students will be asked to complete a questionnaire. Academic Advisors will be asked to participate in small focus group sessions.
Information you provide is confidential. You will be given a Consent Form with contact information if you have any questions after your participation. You are more than welcome to hear about the findings from the study. If you are interested, or if you know of anyone who might be interested, please contact the researcher. An informational meeting will also be held **TBD**.
You can contact the researcher via telephone or email if you have any questions: **Ms. Cicily P. Mapp: _____ or mapp@nova.edu.** This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of an educational program.