

AGAINST ALL ODDS: PERSPECTIVES ON COMPLETION FROM
NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was an exploration of the experiences of a cohort of non-traditional students with identified barriers to academic success who completed their program at a rural community college in the Midwest. They had an extraordinary degree completion rate of 84 percent (the national success rate for community college students is 28 percent). While so much of the literature focuses on reasons for dropping out, the purpose of this study was to reveal factors which students identified as the most valuable to their completion. The findings of this research project can be taken into account while developing support services for non-traditional students in other community colleges.

One of the unique and the most efficient arrangements made for this group was the assignment of one advisor for this cohort of former factory workers. Another factor that helped them to succeed was putting them into the same cohort with the same or almost the same schedule. Their advisor and their instructors encouraged mutual help and the development of team spirit within this particular group. Besides tutors, their college professors were asked to work with these students in the Learning Support Center. Study participants indicated that their advisor, the instructors, their fellow students, and the Learning Support Center made the greatest contribution to their successful completion of the program. It was also found that student engagement and the development of trusting personal relationships between students within the group, as well as between students and their instructors and their advisor were very important factors which contributed to their success.

Keywords: non-traditional students, barriers to success, advisor, instructors, student success, completion, support services, engagement, learning support center

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

This study is an exploration of the experiences of a cohort of students with identified barriers to academic success that completed their program of study- a certificate and /or degree at a rural community college in the Midwest. They beat the odds and had an extraordinary completion rate of 84 percent. The national success rate for community college students is 28 percent (ACT, 2010). The research results shed light on the experience of community college students who faced challenges but overcame them and completed a certificate and/or degree.

Community college students are more likely than those at a four-year college or university to have completion risk factors for a myriad of reasons. They include lack of preparation, delayed entry to college after high school, first generation college participation, part-time college attendance, full-time work while attending college, dependents at home, and single parenthood. These students may also lack some of the personal conditions that contribute to success such as dependable child care, employer flexibility, support from family and friends, counseling, and public assistance. Additionally institutional barriers such as an unwelcoming environment, language barriers, instructors who are inexperienced with diverse students, racial stereotyping, lack of adequate and accessible financial aid, and difficulty in gaining necessary information may impede their success (Myran, 2009).

Due to large numbers of manufacturing jobs being transferred abroad, many factory employees are seeking retraining and new educational opportunities so they may compete in the changing work environment in the 21st century. Many of those individuals are turning to community colleges for those opportunities. Students who attend community college are typically older, with an average age of 27 as compared with an average age of 24 at 4-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). These older students must often balance work, school and family responsibilities (Eddy, 2010). And on top of those challenges we also know that nation-wide, 44 percent of first-time community college students enroll in at least one developmental course (Cohen & Brawer as cited in Eddy, 2010). Helping students move through remedial courses presents significant challenges to community college employees. This cohort of individuals that is the subject of this study had educational funding provided through the Trade Readjustment Act (TRA) and Trade Adjustment Assistance program (TAA), and managed to complete their educational goals of earning a certificate and/or degree, despite the odds being against them.

“The nation’s 1,165 open-admissions community colleges already enroll 44 percent of all U.S. undergraduates. Over the last five years, enrollments have climbed by more than twenty-five percent. Over sixty percent of incoming community college students require some form of developmental education, making them among the hardest-to-serve students” (AACC, 2010, p. 6). With many students entering community colleges due to the effects of globalization on the workplace, community colleges continue to seek ways to retain the students that walk through their open doors.

“The workforce of today and into the future needs to be more educated than the workforces of previous generations. Educating a competitive workforce helps to stimulate both the local and state economies. It also helps individuals improve their lives and the lives of their family members. Employers are seeking specific higher-order skills and prefer graduates who have gone through systematic programs of study” (AACC, 2012).

Although research has been conducted to identify barriers to success, very little has been done to identify the student perspective in the complex issues of retention and completion. This study adds to the knowledge base and further enlightens institutions about the factors that students identify as most valuable to their completion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is twofold (1) to identify the factors (personal, programmatic, institutional) that resulted in a very high completion rate among a cohort of students enrolled at a Midwestern community college after being laid off from factory jobs, (2) to determine how those factors correlate with completion factors identified in national community college initiatives.

A qualitative research design was planned since such a design best fits researchers that are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences and gain meaning from those experiences (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research focuses on meaning and understanding; the main goal being to understand the phenomenon from the participant’s perspectives. The study had an applied focus since the research results will ideally improve the way things are done. By uncovering any similarities between the

students, the college may be able to improve support services in order to increase completion rates among those students with multiple barriers.

Research Questions

1. From the students' perspective, what helped them to complete a community college program/certificate despite the multiple barriers they had to overcome?
2. What role does a feeling of engagement play (if any) in the student's persistence to degree/certificate completion at a community college?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that the researcher used for this study include Tinto's work on student engagement, Marcus and Nurius' work on possible selves, and Pascarella and Terenzini's work on cognitive readiness and institutional commitment. Tinto's conceptual frameworks are widely used regarding persistence and completion (1993). The framework suggests that administrators and faculty should try to foster the academic and social engagement of their students within their colleges. Tinto (1993) further suggests that in order for students to successfully become part of a college community, they must first leave their family, friends and community behind in order to interact fully within the educational institution. Furthermore, he suggests that those who do not fully integrate or whose values are starkly different from those of the institution are more likely to depart from the institution. Negative interactions and experiences tend to reduce integration and are likely to distance the individual from academic and social communities which leads to marginality and ultimately withdrawal. Tinto posits that both social and academic assimilation are integral for students to persist.

Tinto's model is primarily concerned with intra-institutional influences on students and with the influences exerted on students by other individuals including other students, faculty, family, and non-college peers.

Community college faculty and staff have opportunities to help students explore their potential within certain career or professional arenas. We will consider the work of Markus and Nurius, which involves the development of individuals' best possible selves. Markus and Nurius proposed the concept of *possible selves* which are "individual's conceptions of future selves including the selves that are ideal and hoped for, as well as those possible selves that one fears or dreads" (Rossiter, 2007, p. 5). When adult students come to community college, they are frequently in a position of exploring their future options and development through education. Adult education is about possibilities including financial self-sufficiency, personal growth, career advancement, empowerment, self worth, and transformation. Past self-representations influence possible selves to the extent that the past self will be reactivated in certain circumstances. Individuals hold an array of potential self-conceptions based on his or her past experiences, socio-cultural life context, and current situation.

Possible selves are representations of the self and possible future states and they give form, specificity, direction, and imagery to the goals, aspirations, or fears that individuals may have. The likelihood of achieving a desired end depends partially on the ability to keep the associated successful possible self-operating with the working self-concept (Rossiter, 2007). Cameron's research suggests that possible selves are influenced by the social groups one identifies with and psychological well-being is derived from group-derived efficacy- the belief that belonging to a group will help one achieve a

hoped-for self (1999). Individuals are encouraged to explore various aspects of the self and thus students benefit from the different perspectives of the possible selves. Many adult learners are in the process of exploring new possibilities for themselves, and faculty and advisors can facilitate that exploration (Rossiter, 2007).

New possibilities can be explored through educational relationships. Sometimes a comment or suggestion from an instructor can plant the seed that creates a new possibility that the student had not previously considered. An educator may also awaken or reactivate a goal that a learner considered unattainable. This is often the case with students who experience setbacks or who have had little positive feedback from key support people in the past. “But the combination of incremental success, perseverance, and focused encouragement from a teacher or mentor can enable a student to resurrect a lost possible self” (Rossiter, 2007, p. 11). Babitz (2002) confirms that alumni reported that community college experiences gave them their first glimpse of what education could do for their lives. Many community college alumni report that their first successful and affirming learning experiences occurred while attending community college. These were life altering experiences for many of these people. Perhaps more than any other social institution, college environments should offer a setting in which the impetus and opportunities for change are substantial (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Educational relationships also serve to strengthen confidence in relation to possible selves. This process usually involves an instructor detailing a possible self, enabling the student to form a more elaborate picture of that possibility. It is also essential that the instructor identify goals and specific strategies for achieving short-term goals. Students must also be made aware of possible barriers and setbacks, and be

prepared with strategies to deal with them should they arise. Positive and practical feedback from instructors or mentors is a strong force to strengthen the sense of efficacy for an adult learner (Rossiter, 2007).

There are institutional efforts that can assist in student development and exploration. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggest that it is reasonable to expect colleges and universities to promote and facilitate cognitive readiness through student encounters with various modes of inquiry, training in logic, critical thinking, and the evaluation of alternative ideas and courses of action. Higher educational institutions should also be expected to assist students as they test ideas and beliefs, practice new roles, and develop interpersonal relationships at more mature levels. It will also be necessary to provide services and advisors to help students through periods of personal and intellectual disorientation that may arise due to change and development.

Student success does not occur by accident, but in fact requires institutional commitment and investment. Coordination of retention activities, establishing goals, implementing strategies, and assessing the impact of those strategies are the intentional actions that community college leaders must make. There is a growing body of research suggesting that learning support and academic advising are the most significant contributors to student success. Institutions that focus on these themes may then reap the benefits of increased student retention and success (Habley, 2011).

Tinto asserts that the degree to which students feel a sense of belonging and support within the college environment, their willingness to attend the college again and their overall satisfaction with their experiences are precursors of educational attainment and essential elements for student success (Tinto, 1993).

Definition of Terms

College students' success depends greatly on their success in high school. Because of the open-door policy, community colleges have experienced an influx of students who cannot cope with college-level classes without some kind of remediation, which is frequently called developmental education.

Definitions of *developmental education* vary little. “Basic skills are those foundation skills...which are necessary for students to succeed in college level work” (RP Group, 2007). Grubb and Associates (1999) define remediation as activities “for students who initially do not have the skills, experience, or orientation necessary to perform at a level that the institutions or instructors recognize as ‘regular’ for those students” (p. 174). The U.S. Department of Education defines developmental education as: “Courses in reading, writing and mathematics for college students lacking those skills necessary to perform college-level work at the level required by the institution (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 1996, p. 2)

Horn (1996) defined *non-traditional students* as having at least one of the following characteristics: 1. Delayed enrollment following high school graduation, 2. Part-time student for at least part of the academic year, 3. Works 35 hours or more while attending school, 4. Is considered financially independent, and 5. Is a de facto single parent.

Community college, for purposes of this study, will be defined as a public or private 2-year institution that grants Associate degrees and provides non-credit training and certification.

Completion will be defined as a student completing their educational goal that they set out to achieve.

Walleri (1981) suggests that it is very difficult to define *retention* for community college students and there is no common definition among institutions. Rather than the traditional university definition of “on-time graduation”, Walleri suggests that “retention can be defined in terms of program completion” (1981, p. 5). For purposes of this study, this definition will be used.

In this study, *persistence* refers to the students “firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition” (Oxford, 2012). *Student success* is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational goals, and post-college performance (Kuh et al, 2007).

Personal factors that influence student persistence will be defined as personal conditions that contribute to success such as dependable child care, physical and mental health, employer flexibility, personal motivation factors, faith/religious beliefs, levels of self-efficacy, support from family and friends, family obligations, social support systems, and the availability of public assistance and counseling.

Summary

Although research has been conducted to identify barriers to success, very little has been done to identify the student perspective in the complex issues of retention and completion. This study will add to the knowledge base and further enlighten institutions about the factors that students identify as most valuable to their completion. The next

chapter is a review of the literature that pertains to the issues surrounding student success issues- barriers, institutional practices, and especially student engagement.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Community colleges play a vital and irreplaceable role in our society, communities and global competitiveness (Kucharvy, 2010). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008-2018 Projections Report, occupations in the associate degree category are projected to grow the fastest, at about 19 percent (2010). Community colleges are the primary source for this education. In 2008, community college students constituted 44 percent of all U.S. undergraduates, enrolling 12.4 million students (AACC, 2011). Community colleges play very critical, but different roles in our educational system:

1. Transfer education- for students who want to pursue a Bachelor's Degree.
2. Career education- for students to earn an Associate Degree and immediately enter the workforce.
3. Developmental Education- for those who are not academically prepared for college.
4. Continuing Education- for those who seek development for either personal or professional reasons.
5. Industry training- for people to receive specific training for a particular industry.

6. Student support services- provide student support services including enrollment services, student orientation, financial aid, counseling, tutoring, job placement, special needs service, etc.
7. One of the most important functions of community colleges is that they are one of the nation's most effective enablers of social mobility.

Community colleges tend to be highly attuned to the needs of local business and industries with whom they are willing to partner and thus are good at being part of local economic development. These partnerships can benefit both the colleges and the businesses (Kucharvy, 2010; Vanwagoner, et.al, 2008). Workforce development has allowed community colleges to generate new sources of revenue while helping to create stronger connections with employers and state governments. This is particularly important because of the stagnating state appropriations (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006). No other segment of postsecondary education has been more responsive to community needs than community colleges (Kasper, 2003).

Community colleges are one of the nation's most effective enablers of social mobility. Lifetime earning potential increases significantly with at least some college and continues to increase as one earns higher-level educational degrees. Those who attended college, but did not earn an Associate's degree typically earn 13 percent more than those with just a high school diploma. And those who do complete a degree typically earn 21 percent more. Due to open door policies at community colleges, students are allowed entrance to higher education that they may have otherwise been unable to access. Additionally, community colleges cost an average of 64 percent less than public four-year colleges (Kucharvy, 2010).

Social mobility is linked directly to post secondary education in modern America. College attendance converts into socio-economic advantages as evidenced in later occupational and economic advantages for individuals. Formal education also directly affects status attainment, an effect that is independent of an individual's social origins. The major long-term effect of college is largely manifest in intergenerational transfer of benefits from parents to children. The more fully a person develops his or her intellectual abilities and career opportunities by investing in education, the more likely that individual is to believe in the importance of developing these opportunities for his or her children too (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Roueche & Roueche, 1993).

Community colleges cater to disproportionately higher percentages of ethnic minorities and first generation college students. These colleges are geographically spread out with many locations that allow access within an hour's drive for more than half of the nation's population. They are particularly important as a source of education and vocational training to commuters, those who live in rural areas and those who work at least part-time (Kucharvy, 2010). Community colleges are the main point of access to higher education for low-income and minority students (Rouse, 1995). Community college's access missions include low tuition, flexible scheduling, open-door admissions, and support programs for at-risk students with a variety of social and academic barriers to college success (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). As identified at the Critical Trends and Events Affecting the Future of Community Colleges workshop, the trend of increasing numbers of underprepared students is a reality for today's and tomorrow's community colleges (1995).

There remain important limitations to our education and training system, many stemming from low completion rates, limited accountability, poor coordination among different programs and excessive bureaucratic limitations on the use of funds.

One of the most important issues facing community colleges is the high dropout and non-completion rate. A key factor impeding program completion is lack of preparedness (Executive Office of the President, 2009). Based on 1995-96 student longitudinal study data, 42 percent of students who started college in a two-year institution left within six years without a degree or certificate. Low-income, first generation, and minorities have even lower rates of completion. From these populations, those that do complete usually earn lower level credentials (Bailey et. al, 2005). Nationally, students who begin in the fall, about 25 percent will not return for the spring term and close to 50 percent will not return for the subsequent fall (McClenney, 2011). So, the number of students passing through the open door is not an important success measure, but rather the number of students persisting is of greatest importance (Vanwagoner, Bowman & Spraggs, 2008).

Student success is a key issue today and will continue to require a focus on assessment and accountability within the educational scene in the United States (Wirth & Padilla, 2008).

Workforce Development and Displaced Workers

At the community college, workforce development includes all institutional programs, courses, and activities that prepare students for work (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006). Recently the nation has been attempting to emerge from a recession and people are increasingly turning to education as a means to return to work in an economy that is

demanding new skills and a larger number of knowledge-based workers (Mullin, 2011). The jobs of the future may require workers to add new skills to their existing jobs, create new specialties and solve problems; in many of these cases, additional post secondary education will be required (Wagner, 2011).

From 2009 to 2010, community college students earned 425,000 certificates. Certificates are usually workforce specific but they can serve as a starting point to further education along a career path. The demand for these certificates is strong as indicated by the fact that over the past 20 years there has been a 242 percent increase in the number of certificates earned by community college students (Mullin, 2011).

Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan discovered through their research that older displaced workers participate in community college schooling at lower rates than younger workers. However, among those who do participate, the impact on quarterly earnings for older and younger displaced workers is very similar. Their estimation is that one academic year of community college schooling increases the long-term earnings by about 7 percent for older males and about 10 percent for older females. Their study's results indicate that the displaced workers experienced substantial net benefits from their investment in community college schooling (2004). Additionally, certificate programs offer students a more affordable option than degrees since short term certificates result in higher rates of completion for students with financial and time challenges (Bosworth as cited in Mullin, 2011).

There is a growing body of research which has identified many benefits of attending community college beyond those found in the labor market including changes in health status, well-being, criminal activity and welfare reliance. Having more

education increases the likelihood that a person will be employed as well as having higher wages. Evidence also suggests that vocational certificates and basic credits contribute positively to subsequent earnings (Belfield & Bailey, 2011).

America is changing the way it works and these changes are resulting in the need to raise the minimum basic skill level for workers. Our current global climate requires more sophisticated skills of those individuals who wish to prosper. As a result of this, many analysts fear that if the U.S. workforce is not better prepared, America will be unable to compete in the global economy. Eventually those countries that invest the most in education will end up being the most competitive (Roueche & Roueche, 1993).

Barriers to Student Success

Though these barriers apply to all community college students, the challenges to students who must first complete developmental education classes are generally even more intense. Community college students are more likely than those at university to have completion risk factors which include lack of preparation, delayed entry to college after high school, first generation college attendance, part-time college attendance, full-time work while attending college, dependents at home and single parenthood. These students may also lack some of the personal conditions that contribute to success such as dependable child care, employer flexibility, public assistance, personal counseling, or support from family and friends. Additionally there may be institutional barriers such as an unwelcoming environment, language barriers, inexperienced instructors with diverse students, racial stereotyping, lack of adequate and accessible financial aid and difficulty in gaining necessary information (Myran, 2009).

Pascarella and Terenzini's 1991 research indicates that full-time enrollment in community college increases the probability of graduation, while delaying college entry after high school predicts lower levels of integration with an institution and decreases the probability of graduation.

Students also suffer from the overall lack of clarity and guidance when it comes to course selection and degree planning which frequently overwhelms and frustrates them and thereby impacts their probability of success (Executive Office of the President, 2009). Students' abilities, appropriate placements and likelihood of success on the basis of academic preparation have been traditionally categorized without an accompanying assessment of individual student life context (Pusser & Levin, 2009).

Myran (2009) identifies some additional factors that result in an academic achievement gap between minority students and their Caucasian counterparts. Some of those factors include self-limiting behaviors, family circumstances, institutional practices, demanding classes, not being assigned to honors courses and cultural values. Community colleges may work with other community organizations to remedy the cultural and social ills that cause the disparity. They may also offer intervention strategies to help individuals overcome the gap- such as financial aid, developmental education, tutorial services and diversity training for staff and instructors.

Invalidation was found to be a major barrier to successful learning in Rendon's study of at risk community college students. Student interaction with either non-caring faculty or faculty who discounted student's life experiences were recognized as key elements of this barrier. Discrediting the collegiate nature of community colleges by a student's family and friends also had negative implications for the students. Also

identified in this study were student characteristics that contributed to difficulties with navigating campus life. These characteristics included immaturity, academic under-preparation, fearfulness, self-centeredness, introversion, lack of self initiative, absence of clear goals, and self-doubt (Rendon as cited in Wirth, 2009).

The following areas that hindered student success were identified by Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell's study that focused on urban community college students: Poor and inconsistent counseling, lack of transfer support, inadequate career counseling, bureaucratic red tape, disconnectedness from faculty, insufficient technological resources, lack of math and English competency, lack of support by part-time faculty, and inadequate facilities for studying and parking were identified obstacles (Hagedorn, Perrakis & Maxwell as cited in Wirth, 2009).

One must keep in mind that students who were referred to remedial coursework are very diverse. This group includes students who have done poorly in all subjects, students who are deficient in just one subject, older students who did well in high school but whose skills haven't been used for a long time, students lacking study skills, students with learning problems, and recent immigrants (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Each student should be appropriately assessed for their particular needs and given individualized support to encourage their progress and success.

Developmental Education

Definitions

Definitions of *basic skills*, *developmental education* and *remediation* vary little. The Research and Planning Group of California Community Colleges defined "Basic

skills are those foundation skills...which are necessary for students to succeed in college level work” (RP Group, 2007). Grubb and Associates (1999) define remediation as activities “for students who initially do not have the skills, experience, or orientation necessary to perform at a level that the institutions or instructors recognize as ‘regular’ for those students” (p. 174). The U.S. Department of Education defines *developmental education* as: “Courses in reading, writing and mathematics for college students lacking those skills necessary to perform college-level work at the level required by the institution (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 1996, p. 2).

Need for Developmental Education in Community Colleges

Community college students have varying academic strengths and preparation; the majority require further education in basic skills, language, math, writing and critical thinking (Pusser & Levin, 2009).

Approximately 80 percent or more of community college students can be described as disadvantaged, with academic background and income challenges at the forefront of these disadvantages. Community colleges educate more students in developmental areas than any other post-secondary sector. There are reliable estimates that this area will only increase in importance and will continue to gain attention over the next decade. Many developmental education students do not continue in college beyond two academic terms, yet these basic skills can be necessary for personal achievement and advancement as well eventual completion of college level classes (Pusser & Levin, 2009).

There are many factors that influence student success in community college environments, but preparation for college-level work is clearly a core issue. Since many community colleges are “open access”, many colleges don’t require a threshold level of skills attainment to qualify for admission. In order to best serve these students, community colleges must develop effective strategies for transforming goals into outcomes.

Students who completed any remedial courses were less likely to earn a degree or certificate than students who had no remediation. This observation can be explained if we think about students in need of developmental education as underprepared for college level classes. Their poor preparation for college and lack of study skills prevents them from getting a degree or certificate. Developmental education may help them to succeed but it does not guarantee their success. Remedial reading appears to be the most serious barrier to degree completion. It is associated with lower rates of degree attainment than other remedial course patterns. Enrollment in remedial reading is also associated with higher rates of total remediation since 51 percent of students who took any remedial reading enrolled in four or more remedial forces compared with 31 percent who took any remedial math (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, & Tobin, 2004).

Need for Institutional Effort in Remedial Education

Many community colleges need to change their traditional ways of fulfilling their individual missions due to the increasing demands for better completion rates. Though it takes an act of courage for many people to enroll in courses, it also takes institutional effort to help students successfully complete them (Mullin, 2010). It is believed that

institutional transformational change can improve student completion rates because studies have shown that students perform differently at different institutions- implying that characteristics and practices of an institution can directly affect student success (Bailey, Alfonso, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl & Leinbach, 2004).

Since there are large numbers of underprepared student enrolling in community colleges around the country, faculty are recognizing that developmental education is indeed a college-wide responsibility that should be integrated into the broader curriculum mission. Twenty-first century colleges are beginning to create and explore college-wide organizational, programmatic, and professional development strategies that will help their underprepared students to succeed (Kozeracki & Brooks, 2006).

A shortcoming of current developmental education assessments is that they are designed to determine a student's skills level, but these scores do little to reveal what type of help students need in order to be successful in college. Different students with the same test scores may need very different types of services in order to be successful (Bailey, 2009).

Many colleges have strengthened their student support services such as tutoring and advising that have helped address their low graduation rates. The remaining low success rates are attributed to student personal characteristics and or life challenges (Driscoll as cited in Nitecki, 2011).

In regards to students who begin their community college education with remedial courses, Rutschow and Schneider's work (2011) recommends improving developmental education through the following approaches. First, interventions should be set up that help students to avoid developmental education by improving their skills before they

enroll in college. Second, interventions should be designed to accelerate a student's progress through developmental education coursework. Third, programs should provide contextualized basic skills together with college content coursework. And finally, programs should enhance support services such as advising and tutoring especially for developmental level learners.

Best Practices for Institutions

Boroch et al. (2010) identified the following effective institutional practices for creating student success for developmental education students:

1. Developmental education should be a clearly stated institutional priority.
2. A clearly stated mission based on a shared, overarching philosophy frames the developmental education program.
3. The developmental education program should be centralized and highly coordinated.
4. There should be a comprehensive system of support services, characterized by a high degree of integration among academic and student support services.
5. Institutional policies should facilitate student completion of necessary developmental coursework as early as possible in the educational sequence.
6. Faculty should be both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about developmental education and should be recruited and hired to teach in the program.
7. Institutions should manage faculty and student expectations regarding developmental education.

Some integrated programs have been noted for their success due to the following elements: they pay close attention to their students, integrate teaching with counseling, provide varied learning materials, and motivate students to devote more time to their studies. Basically, when students are given supplemental counseling, tutoring and learning aids, they tend to remain in school. Special treatment of any sort usually leads to special results (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Some effective practices in developmental education that have been found successful include: implementing required student assessment and placement, providing a highly coordinated program, establishing clear objectives and learning outcomes for the program and individual courses, using learning communities, using video-based supplemental instruction, providing tutoring services by well-trained staff, and providing professional development opportunities for those working with underrepresented students (Saxon & Boylan, 2001).

Community colleges have attempted to improve academic achievement by increasing the supports that many developmental education students require outside of the classroom. Many popular approaches include tutoring, intensive advising and student success courses. Of these approaches, student success courses have been seen as most promising (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Valencia Community College was honored for its excellent execution of data-informed initiatives to help close performance gaps among students from differing ethnic and economic backgrounds. These efforts included adding supplemental learning opportunities from peer mentors in the courses identified as being most difficult for incoming students to complete. Learning communities are formed for students to take linked courses together. These linked courses are usually one of the

developmental math courses and a student life skills course. However, that has since expanded to include composition, U.S. government, and college algebra courses. The college also required students who tested into all three developmental disciplines (math, reading, and writing) to enroll in a student life skills course. The average success rate for all ethnicities in their six gateway courses improved from 62 percent to 65 percent in 2008 (Achieving the Dream, 2009).

Technology's Place in Developmental Education

The challenge for our current educational system is to leverage the learning sciences with modern technology to create engaging, relevant, and personalized learning for all learners that mirror students' daily lives and the reality of their futures. Supporting student learning in areas that are of real concern or particular interest to them, personalized learning adds to its relevance, inspiring higher levels of motivation and achievement. One of the goals and recommendations from the National Educational Technology Plan is to develop and adopt learning resources that tap the flexibility and power of technology to reach all learners anytime and anywhere (Transforming American Education, 2010). This could be especially useful for developmental education students as well as other at-risk students since access comes in many forms and lack of access can create serious barriers to student success.

Some promising technologies can be used to improve success for underprepared students. This includes the use of clicker technologies that enable students to respond immediately, giving feedback to instructors about their levels of comprehension. Simulated testing, artificial intelligence tutoring and online assessment testing are

strategic technologies that can enhance instruction, increase retention and improve critical thinking skills. Game-based technology also holds promise since students who are experienced game players effectively adapt their skills to course content. Wireless tables and other smart technologies have also enhanced the learning opportunities for those with language barriers. If students are uncomfortable speaking, they may ask questions anonymously or type thoughts/ answers through various computer technologies. Voice annotation software enhances this even further (Bulger, 2009).

Johnson's (2000) study of the effectiveness of computer technology for developmental students revealed five major approaches that produced success as well as persistence: 1. Providing an orientation on computer lab policies and software usage, 2. Developing adequate typing skills by midterm, 3. Allowing sufficient time for people with weak computer skills to improve them, 4. Matching the course objectives to activities in the software, and 5. Coaching the tutors to have multiple functions (tutor, trainer, problem-solver). These steps served as building blocks to students' academic success.

Research results continue to indicate that developmental students benefit from the use of technology in the classroom because it provides flexibility, reduces seat time, and increases computer literacy. All of these things enhance their ability to succeed in upper-level courses and it offers them access to help and tutoring when they need it (Bulger, 2009).

Characteristics of Students Who are Likely to Graduate

Much research has been done indicating that "students who have stronger high school records, come from higher income families, whose parents also went to college,

who do not delay college entry after high school, who attend full-time, and who do not interrupt their college studies are more likely to graduate” (Bailey et. al, 2005, p. 2).

However, as Bailey et. al suggest, community colleges would defeat their purpose if they were to become more selective, cutting out large numbers of students who could benefit from college (2005).

As a result of their research, Bailey et. al concluded that individual characteristics are more strongly related to completion probabilities than institutional factors. Part of this may be due to the fact that well-prepared students with academic resources are likely to survive and do well no matter which institution they attend. And on the other hand, students with many challenges, including personal and financial responsibilities, may have trouble even in colleges with a lot of support (2005).

The What Works in Student Retention survey (WWISR) found that the following 14 student characteristics had the greatest effects on attrition: level of preparation for college level work, study skills, adequacy of financial resources, commitment to earning a degree, level of motivation, family responsibilities, level of job demands, socioeconomic status, amount of financial aid available, coping skills, educational aspirations and goals, certainty about career goals, level of emotional support available, and first generation status. These characteristics suggest a clear focus for intensive interventions to combat attrition (Habley, 2011).

Students must possess sufficient heuristic knowledge and take effective action when confronted with barriers to completion. If knowledge is insufficient or if actions are unsuccessful, students must acquire additional heuristic knowledge or take more effective

actions in order to progress toward completion. Otherwise, the student may end up dropping out (Wirth & Padilla, 2008).

The Institutional Elements of Success

Benchmarks

Developing college know-how is essential since students must understand how to navigate the college environment. Providing students with college know-how is not frequently done on college campuses since guidance and counseling services are overburdened and underfunded (Karp, 2011).

According to Pusser and Levin (2009), students should be interviewed and assessed upon entry into an academic institution in order to determine educational, financial, and social needs. These interviews and assessments can help guide placement for basic skills, learning disabilities, financial aid, childcare, job placement, social services or other assistance. Individual student plans that include short and long term career goals have also been found to be effective.

It is necessary to focus on the way community colleges design and manage their first year students' experiences. This includes the students' first contacts with the college, the entry process (including assessment and course placement), academic advising and planning, financial aid, registration, first year seminars, classroom experiences and academic support services.

According to the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), there are six benchmarks of effective practice with entering students in community college. The first benchmark is related to early connections. When asked about why they persisted, the

focus group participants referred to a strong, early connection to someone at the college. Colleges should therefore work on developing early connection opportunities for their incoming students (McClenney, 2011).

The second benchmark involves students sensing that the faculty and staff have high expectations for their success. When students sense this, they will often rise to meet those expectations. Thus, college faculty should set clear expectations and hold students accountable for meeting them.

The third benchmark describes the importance of an understandable academic plan and pathway. This is clearly one of the most critical tools to help students stay on track toward college success, showing them the path to achievement of their academic goals (McClenney, 2011).

Benchmark four involves the development of an effective track to college readiness. There are several significant components that are involved in the entering students' experiences. These include such things as accurate assessment of academic skills, appropriate course placements, instructional support and other support strategies to help ensure students are building the skills necessary to succeed in college. Colleges would do well to monitor the effectiveness of their current strategies and improve policies as necessary (McClenney, 2011).

Benchmark five is concerning engaged learning. The most effective learning experiences are prepared with intention. Students from the SENSE focus groups described a good class as a highly active learning environment that included classroom discussions, small group work, and instructors who were passionate about their subject matter and their students' success (McClenney, 2011).

The sixth and final benchmark involves academic and social support networking. It has been found that community college students benefit significantly from support-including academic and student support services. Because entering students are not aware of what they don't know, colleges must purposely create networks. Students need to be made aware of all of the support services that are available to them in order to boost their chances of tapping those resources and gaining the assistance they need to succeed (McClenney, 2011).

Many community college students arrive on campus with motivation to succeed but large numbers of students behave in ways that are not conducive to their own academic success. Students are oftentimes unaware of the consequences of their skipping classes or failing to turn in assignments. Student success courses show promising results in helping to prepare students with the skills and habits for college success (McClenney, 2011).

Individual colleges can find the right answers for the entering student experience by engaging the whole college community with data about their own students. There is also a recommendation that each entering group should be treated as a distinct cohort. Entering students are different from continuing students and thus the college should develop an entering student experience. Colleges should also overcome the reluctance to require college orientation, student success courses, learning communities and other experiences that have been found effective in the promotion of student success (McClenney, 2011).

One model that helps students prepare for college level work before they enter post secondary education involves alerting students to their academic weak points before

they leave high school. Early college readiness assessments are given to upper-level high school students so that they are given the opportunity to develop their skills in high school or through summer bridge programs. Acceleration models also hold a lot of promise by allowing fast-track courses that compress developmental education coursework into several weeks or half of a semester. Students are able to complete self-paced or modularized courses along with mainstream courses (often with additional supports such as tutoring and study skill courses) (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011).

Contextualized instruction models allow academically underprepared students to progress more quickly through developmental courses while engaging in their academic or vocational field of interest. Learning communities which allow students to enroll in developmental courses linked with college-level courses can also provide integrated environments in which to engage with both basic skills learning and college-level course content (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011).

The following retention practices identified by the WWISR survey results suggest these initiatives have a significant impact on retention: reading lab, learning assistance center, tutoring, mandated placement into courses based on test scores, remedial coursework, increased number of academic advisors, math lab, and programs for first generation students (Habley, 2011).

Ultimately community colleges should always seek innovative ways to lessen or completely remove barriers to student success (Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Karp recommends the following: advising and counseling should be efficient and personalized, non-academic supports should be intrusive so that students are forced to encounter them,

and community colleges should create more structure by simplifying student choices and minimizing how many decisions they must make (2011).

Community college students often have unanticipated challenges to making college life feasible. Frequently there are conflicts between the demands of work, family, and school. This is particularly acute for students who commute. However, Braxton et.al (2004) suggest that students who feel that their college cares about their welfare are more likely to persevere (as cited in Karp, 2011). They also recommended other non-academic supports such as offering on-site day care, offering courses at a variety of times, providing on-campus work opportunities, and providing transportation assistance. All of these institutional efforts may support and enhance the experiences of students who face multiple barriers to completion.

Student Success Courses

Student success courses are typically aimed at providing new students with information about the college, information about academic and career planning, and techniques for improving study habits and other coping skills. The goal is to orient students to the college environment. Students in a 2009 study benefited from taking student success courses in a variety of ways. They obtained information about the college, developed skills to help them academically, and developed important relationships. These relationships were particularly important in light of Tinto's theory involving integration of new students and bonding relationships. There was a lot of emphasis on participation in group activities which allowed the students to get to know one another and find things that they had in common. As a result, the relationships

transcended the college success course and created a broader sense of integration into the college for the students (O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009).

As a result of their social interactions, students who form social relationships with peers benefit. The students gain access to information that can help them in college including information on what professors they should take, what classes are required, or what offices to visit for the resources they may need. Researchers recommend that student success instructors should be named as official advisors for their students since it would give the students a clear source of advising with someone who knows them and their goals (O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009).

College survival and transition topics help to enhance the intellectual competence of incoming students while also promoting student confidence. Duggan and Williams’ study participants strongly recommended that other students take an orientation course since it was seen as very valuable. These researchers wonder if a one-course-fits-all is not valuable since not all topics are valuable for all students. Duggan and Williams recommend that each college develop, within their orientation program, an environment in which very different students can find a pathway to their academic or professional goals. Special populations need unique attention in order to help them overcome any particular barriers they may face (Duggan & Williams, 2011).

Academic Advisors’ Role in Student Success

Academic advisors are at the center of the connections to all other support services for students and they are the only structured and ongoing opportunity for one-on-one interaction with a concerned representative of the college. As a result, advisors play a

crucial role in meeting first-year student needs and ensuring that they are connected to other areas of support offered by the college (King & Fox, 2011).

The following five critical skills or attributes were identified by Fox (2008) as necessary for academic advisors to be successful in their role. First, advisors must have core knowledge of the college's policies and guidelines. Second, academic advisors should be skilled as a confidence builder, encourager and champion for students. Third, academic advisors should be cordial. A kind, earnest and welcoming approach can set the right tone for an effective relationship between student and advisor. Fourth, an academic advisor should possess credibility so that students will know their advisor is their advocate, and will assist them in establishing their academic and career goals. Finally, academic advisors should be creative and help to develop creativity within students so that they can work together to develop the student's academic and career plans. In that way, students will develop wisdom regarding multiple pathways and options for achieving their goals.

Clarifying aspirations is important since students who do not have clear goals are likely to be derailed by minor challenges and setbacks (Grubb as cited in Karp, 2011). Helping students to clarify goals and understand how the college can help them achieve those goals may increase their likelihood to persist and earn a credential. Research evidence suggests that advising activities help student outcomes by assisting students to develop a concrete set of steps for reaching their goals and by teaching them how their course work relates to those goals (Karp, 2011).

Instructors' Role in Student Success

Tinto suggests that if academic and social involvement or integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom (1997). Not accustomed to using performance data as a basis for decisions and actions in the classroom, instructors must move toward a culture of learning and success. Many struggle with the collection of student performance data. Instructors often lack the capacity and expertise to articulate student learning goals, create learning outcome tools or design interventions that work. Recent innovations in teaching and learning are centering on programs that respond to varied learning needs and styles of diverse students (Myran, 2009).

Instructors play an important role in engaging students in learning. Research indicates that academically underprepared students take advantage of opportunities for engagement with instructors and counselors more than academically prepared students do. They work harder than they thought they could in order to meet an instructor's expectations. They are also motivated to write more papers and reports. This reveals that underprepared students must work harder than academically prepared students to produce similar learning outcomes while they work to overcome the burden of limited literacy skills (CCSSE, 2005). Especially important is student contact with faculty. That engagement, both in and out of the classroom, is particularly important to student development (Tinto, 1997).

Awareness matters as Lardner (2003) mentions in a useful program for college instructors, staff and administration called "Critical Moments". This is a project that was developed which includes interviews with students about their "critical moments"- the

moments when they considered dropping out of college. This resource can be a powerful tool as institutions look for strategies to improve retention.

Anderson recommends teaching and assessment practices that help the learning of all students including those students who have historically not been well served by higher education. He posits that most of the teaching in higher education tends to be strongly analytical. However, as a result many students who are more relationally oriented are excluded because the learning environments do not create opportunities to connect learning and life or to put new learning into contexts that are meaningful to them (2001). Developmental courses are particularly effective when they account for the diversity of the student population and use pedagogy that is sensitive and specific to the needs of this population (Pusser & Levin, 2009). Awareness of the needs of today's diverse learners is something that faculty must be prepared for through the use of various methods.

Learning Communities

Students who were in learning communities had relationships and spent more time together, often sharing similar interests. Karp's 2011 analysis identified four non-academic mechanisms that appear to encourage student success. These include creating social relationships, clarifying aspirations, developing college know-how, and making college life possible. Meaningful relationships increase persistence since they help students feel more comfortable in college. This is particularly important for non-traditional students. Tinto's work supports this concept (1993). People who work at the college can encourage interpersonal connections, advice and motivation (Bensimon as cited in Karp, 2011).

Learning communities have been found to increase retention. Tinto's 1987 research indicates that learning communities' design should incorporate: 1. Providing social and academic activities (formal and informal), 2. Addressing issues of academic preparedness, and 3. Engendering a sense of belonging to a campus community. Additionally, research on peer effects indicates that students benefit if they take classes with high-performing students (Winston & Zimmerman, 2004).

Rutschow and Schneider's analysis also found that learning communities were beneficial for students- leading to higher levels of engagement and a stronger sense of belonging. Additionally, learning community programs which link a developmental education or developmental English course with the college level course resulted in increased number of credit hours earned and students' progression through developmental education (2011).

Proponents of learning communities believe that when students spend time together in several classes they are more likely to form social and academic support networks which in turn help them to persist and succeed in school (Weiss, Visher & Wathington, 2010).

Tinto's research finds that participation in a shared learning group enables students to develop a network of support that serves to help bond the students to the broader social communities in the college and also helps to engage them more fully in academic life. These cohort relationships seem to be especially important for commuting and working students. The more students are involved (both academically and socially), the more likely they are to be involved in their own learning and willing to invest the time and energy needed to learn (1997).

Social membership may be somewhat more important than academic membership especially in the first year of college. Attaching to relevant social groups may help students cope with the difficulties of beginning college. This attachment and social support may be a precondition for subsequent involvement. Though academics matter, students are largely concerned with social membership at first and then as they progress through their first year there is a shift toward a greater emphasis on academic issues. Social membership must first be achieved or the concerns over it addressed before students can focus their attention on academic involvement. This is particularly true for older students who commute. They must first have their presence on campus validated by evaluating their own ability to cope with the academic demands of the college (Tinto, 1997).

Engagement

The more engaged students are, the more likely they are to persist and succeed in college (Tinto, 1997; McClenney, 2011). In fact, student engagement that is effective essentially heightens the chances of success for students who bring an assortment of risks factors to college with them (McClenney, 2011).

Literature also supports that student satisfaction and engagement are fostered by practically-focused courses and subject matter that relates well to a student's interests and employment goals (Astin as cited in Nitecki, 2011). Also of importance are internship and practical training opportunities that are a clear connection to jobs. Study participants expressed that this relevance to their career lives kept them interested and engaged in their course work. Nitecki's 2011 study results indicate that although few community college students identify with the college as a whole through participation in student

activities, connection with a program has the potential to significantly engage and retain students. Building a program culture, having a clear program philosophy, handling advisement within the program, connecting curriculum to career goals, and helping students navigate bureaucracy, can potentially be applied to any program and will lead to greater student success (Nitecki, 2011).

Institutional Efforts to Increase Engagement

Community college's can increase completion by making sure that students understand, right up front, the benefits of completing the program as well as how to find the program that is best suited to them (Mullin, 2011).

The characteristics that are under the control of colleges include such things as the size of the institution, the percentage of faculty that are employed part-time and the balance between certificates and associate degrees awarded. Employing large numbers of adjunct faculty is considered a negative educational practice. Having large numbers of part-time professors makes it difficult for colleges to develop the environments suggested by Tinto's engagement model. On the other hand, part-time practitioners may be more effective in occupational fields (Bailey et. al, 2005). In general, Bailey et. al found that students in colleges with more part-time faculty have lower graduation rates (2005).

Tinto's engagement model would also predict that large percentages of part-time students on campus would weaken persistence since it's more difficult to develop the socially and academically engaged environment that is called for by this perspective. This suggests that establishing an environment that promotes engagement will be more difficult on campuses with a highly heterogeneous student population. The more

personalized atmosphere and services that would most likely be seen in smaller institutions may benefit at least traditional age students on community college campuses (Bailey et. al, 2005).

Colleges that emphasize certificates have been shown to have higher graduation rates. Bailey et. al suggest that this may be true because it is easier to complete a one-year certificate than a two-year degree (2005).

Bailey et. al found that institutions with larger enrollment, with a larger percentage of minority students, part-time students, and women have lower graduation rates. They also found that greater institutional expenditures in the area of instruction are related to greater likelihood of graduation (2005).

In their 2005 study Bailey et. al found that students enrolled in medium-size community colleges (1,001-5,000 students) are between 13 and 15 percent less likely to have a successful outcome than students in small colleges (less than 1,000 students). In general they found that graduation rates go down as the size of the school increases.

A rather surprising finding of their research is that relatively large expenditures on academic support is negatively associated with the probability to complete (2005).

Another interesting finding from Bailey's team research (2005) was that financial factors do not have strong effects on completion rates. Expenditure patterns in tuition levels were not related to differences in graduation probabilities. Those variables seem to have a stronger influence on graduation from four-year colleges.

All of this information must be considered within their study's finding that "individual student characteristics have a greater bearing on individual graduation rates than do institutional characteristics" (Bailey et. al, 2005, p. 22). Furthermore, institutional

policies, practices, and programs may be more influential than institutional characteristics such as size, student composition, and overall expenditures (Bailey et. al, 2005).

In 2008, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) offered the following performance benchmarks to compare with other community colleges. The first involves active and collaborative learning. When students are more actively involved in their education they learn more. The next benchmark involves student effort since each student's behavior contributes most significantly to his or her learning. The third benchmark involves academic challenge: students need challenging work and high instructor standards. The fourth benchmark involves student and instructor interaction. Students who spend more time with teachers are more likely to learn effectively and persist in the achievement of their educational goals. And the fifth benchmark involves support for learners. Colleges that are committed to the success of their students and cultivate good working and social relationships among the various groups on their campus are more likely to have better performing and more satisfied students (CCSSE, 2008).

Future Directions

The Achieving the Dream (2007) initiative identified the following indicators of student achievement that can be measured and analyzed for data-informed decisions on institutional improvement. The indicators include the percentage of students who:

1. Complete developmental education courses
2. Take developmental education courses and then enroll in and complete college-level courses

3. Complete gatekeeper courses (entry level courses in disciplines)
4. Enroll from one semester to the next
5. Complete certificates and associate degrees
6. Transfer to four year colleges or universities

Some of the benchmarks that can be useful for assessing effectiveness are: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-instructor interaction and support for learners. These benchmarks can also be used to compare to other community colleges in order to best meet the needs for student success (Achieving the Dream, 2007). Since student outcomes are integral to institutional quality, it is essential that schools gather data to determine whether improvements are making a difference. This is also important as they try to make conclusions about strengths and weaknesses of different programs (Kazin & Payne, 2009). Though many colleges cite the cost issue for not implementing effective practices that have demonstrated improvement of student outcomes, upon closer examination, there may in fact be long range revenue when students succeed in developmental education. Frequently colleges use recruitment as the primary tool for capturing enough enrollments to generate revenue. Borocho et al. (2010) suggest that investment in developmental education can be as productive in maintaining revenue as recruitment while more effectively fulfilling the mission of community colleges namely: to provide access to higher education by ensuring the success of all who can benefit.

Ultimately, community college leaders will have to create a culture of learning and success in which all institutional programs, services and processes are oriented

toward and judged by their effect on learning (Myran, 2009). Boroch et al. (2010) suggest that there are the long term fiscal benefits to the institution that put extra resources “on the front end” to ensure that more students succeed and attain their educational goals. Though some lament the ever-increasing under-preparation of the community college student population, our society cannot afford to ignore the potential for success that is available in postsecondary education. A renewed commitment and concentrated effort in student success marks the beginning of a new chapter in community colleges’ efforts to provide an effective pathway to higher education for *all* students. Mendoza et al. (2009) contend that there is a better understanding of the needs of students being served, and more programming is being provided. However, the issue of improving retention continues to be a critical theme for community colleges.

Based on the WWISR survey, the following recommendations were made for directions colleges should take to improve completion rates. Designate a person to be responsible for coordinating retention initiatives. Coordination, planning and implementation could be best achieved by having a single person responsible for keeping the whole campus community working in the same direction. There should also be an overall retention goal set by each college. Since each institution is unique, it is most appropriate for them to work on improving their existing retention rate (Habley, 2011).

Colleges should also work to establish a set of goals with an understanding that there are many definitions of student success. Goals should be set, relative to those many different definitions. And finally, there should be a realistic time frame for the achievement of retention goals. The survey respondents recommended a timeframe of three or more years (Habley, 2011).

One of the main messages from the WWISR survey is the need to focus on learning support, academic assessment and academic advising. Organized study groups and peer and staff mentoring programs are but a few of the recommendations for meeting these student needs.

Another important effort that community colleges should make is to establish a comprehensive student tracking system. Such a system should identify student goals, use of campus services, participation in programs, etc. This information may serve to inform the institution about the effectiveness of their retention efforts (Habley, 2011).

Summary

Chapter 2 contains a review of literature related to workforce development and displaced workers; barriers to student success; developmental education; characteristics of students who are likely to graduate; the institutional elements of success; academic advisors' role in student success, instructors' role in student success, learning communities, and engagement

More research is needed to continue to develop a better understanding of the experience of students in community colleges, especially what accounts for their success or lack of it (Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Karp (2011) recommends that additional research should be conducted to better understand the relationship between non-academic support and student persistence. She further points out that it is important to understand how students perceive these efforts to implement non-academic supports. Students create their own understanding of college and it is this understanding that influences their learning and their perceptions. This study's results fill in some of the gaps that currently exist in

the body of knowledge regarding elements that students identified were essential for their successful completion of their community college program.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purposes of this study were (1) to identify the factors (personal, programmatic, institutional) that resulted in a very high completion rate among a cohort of students enrolled at a Midwestern community college after being laid off from factory jobs, and (2) to determine how those factors are the same or different than student success and completion factors as identified in national community college initiatives.

As identified at the Critical Trends and Events Affecting the Future of Community Colleges workshop, the trend of increasing numbers of underprepared students is a reality for today's and tomorrow's community colleges (1995). Community college students have varying academic strengths and preparation; the majority require further education in basic skills, language, math, writing and critical thinking (Pusser & Levin, 2009). There remain important limitations to our education system, many stemming from low completion rates, inadequate accountability, poor coordination among different programs and excessive bureaucratic limitations on the use of funds. Individuals gain valuable skills in post-secondary education programs, particularly at community colleges, but there are problems with the system. One of the most important is the high dropout and non-completion rate (Executive Office of the President, 2009).

A qualitative research design was utilized since such a design best fits researchers that are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences and gain

meaning from those experiences (Merriam, 2009). The study also had an applied focus since this project focuses on research that will improve the way things are done. By uncovering any possible commonalities between the students, potentially other colleges may be able to improve support services in order to increase completion rates for students with multiple barriers. The results of this research project are able to inform practice.

Since so much of the literature focuses on reasons for dropping out, the focus of this study instead explored the reasons why students succeeded in completing their identified program of study. Furthermore, the issue of engagement was explored to discover if students in any way became “attached” to the college through a significant person, friends, instructors, or by some other experience.

This chapter contains the following sections: (a) Population, (b) Instrument, (c) Treatment of Data, (d) Data Analysis, (e) Validity and Reliability and (g) Researcher Bias and Assumptions.

Population

The population for this study was a purposeful sample. It was made up of former factory employees who became cohort members at a rural community college in the Midwest. A cohort was created in order to assist in the group of newly unemployed individuals due to a local factory closing. The advisor who worked most closely with the cohort explained that initially the college was contacted because a factory in the local community was closing and wanted to find an opportunity for retraining for its employees that were losing their jobs. The following are some highlights of the group’s composition.

- 27 students began
- 16 were women

- 11 were men
- 2 students failed their first semester and did not return
- 22 students graduated
- 3 were within 1 credit of finishing
- 1 of the group members was from a different factory but qualified for the programs and so was allowed to join this cohort
- Most of the students started the program in January of 2009 and completed in December 2010.

All students had an Educational Development Plan (EDP). The students were thus able to see all the classes that they were to take semester-by-semester laid out on a matrix. The advisor brought attention to the fact that all of the classes needed to be finished within that timeframe or their funding would run out.

The students had financial support due to the fact that their jobs were being sent out of the country. There was an opportunity to use federal funds from that Trade Readjustment Allowances (TRA) and Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Acts. The Trade Act programs offer a weekly payment called Trade Readjustment Allowances (TRA). If a worker is eligible for TAA and/or NAFTA-TAA, they may be able to continue receiving weekly income support payments in the form of TRA after the exhaustion of unemployment compensation benefits. Basic TRA usually lasts 26 weeks. To receive basic TRA payments under a TAA certification, the worker must be enrolled in an approved training program after a job loss (US Dept. of Labor, 2012). Essentially, those workers were eligible for two years of fully paid training for re-education and two years of unemployment compensation.

Presentations were made to the potential students. The college personnel realized that they should have a single contact person to simplify the whole process for these displaced workers. This is when an advisor was assigned to be the “single point of contact” that the students would have at the college. The advisor recognized that these

potential students would need some special attention as they made their transition to the higher education environment. She saw immediately that they would need help in transitioning from a factory setting to an academic setting. The majority of the students were between the ages of 35 and 55. The program required that these students attend school full-time, year-round or lose their funding. So the goal was to have the students complete six consecutive semesters, earning at least 12 credits per semester with a target completion date of December 2010.

Instrument

The former students were first contacted by mail. A letter from the president of the college invited the students to participate in the study. If the person agreed to participate, they were requested to contact the researcher via phone or email. That information was in the letter of invitation to the students that accompanied the president's letter. Seven female students responded after two separate mailings were sent to the cohort members.

The researcher developed a survey instrument to collect the responses to a series of questions based on the information received from the advisor and the current literature pertaining to student success. This instrument contained 30 questions that were asked of the individual students (Appendix A). A structured interview process was used to obtain information from the participants. The students were interviewed one at a time. The researcher obtained consent from the participants before beginning the interview (Appendix B). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a transcriptionist.

The setting for the interviews was a quiet room with no distractions where others were not able to listen in on the interview. The interviews took no more than one and one

half hours to complete. Responses to the survey were anonymous. The individual responses were heard exclusively by the researcher and a transcriptionist. No names were mentioned in the interviews, or if they were, during transcription pseudonyms were applied to protect the individuals' identity. The participants were identified by their Personalized Identification Number (PIN). The researcher holds all responses as confidential. The PIN record sheet was kept in a locked location, accessible only to the researcher, and the original data sheets were shredded.

The survey instrument was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ferris State University before being used for this study (Appendix C). The researcher also developed a survey instrument with questions for the staff and faculty that worked most closely with this cohort in order to obtain their perceptions about the cohort's high completion rate (See Appendix D). This instrument contains 8 questions that will be asked of the individual employees. The researcher contacted these individuals directly at the college. The interviews took no more than one hour to complete. The same protocol that was used for the students was also used for the instructors and the advisor who were interviewed.

Additionally, a set of 8 questions was developed for the advisor that was assigned to this cohort and who worked most closely with the students throughout their whole experience at the college (See Attachment E).

Each participant received a copy of the consent form with information about the purpose of the study, description, procedure and confidentiality. The form also described the time required to complete the interview, risks associated with participation and

contact information for the researcher and the IRB director. The consent form is identified as Appendix B for students and Appendix F for faculty/staff.

Treatment of the Data

Responses were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Responses to the survey were anonymous. The individual responses were heard exclusively by the researcher and a transcriptionist. No names were mentioned in the interviews, or if they were, during transcription pseudonyms were applied to protect the individuals' identity. The participants were identified by their Personalized Identification Number (PIN). The researcher holds all responses as confidential. The PIN record sheet was kept in a locked location, accessible only to the researcher, and the original data sheets were shredded.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) recommends using identifying notations so that the researcher can access them as needed for analysis and final write-up. Researchers should keep track of their thoughts, speculations, and hunches as they prepare their data for analysis. These observations are helpful as a researcher moves between emerging analysis and the raw data of interviews, field notes, and documents. This researcher documented those notations in a Word document so that as data were gathered, they could be reviewed for emerging themes/categories, etc. The research was analyzed from a Constructivist perspective, seeking to describe, interpret, and understand the experience of these degree completers. Since qualitative data are emergent, the researcher doesn't know very much before actually getting into the data collection. A researcher may have hunches and/or working hypotheses. It is only after beginning to gather data can the researcher verify

their hunches and hypotheses. It is a very dynamic process by which the researcher analyzes and develops the data as they conduct the study (Merriam, 2009).

Validity and Reliability

Part of the process of analysis of this study included using the constant comparative method. With this method, it is only when a researcher works with their own data in trying to answer their research questions can they analyze the data. Merriam (2009) recommends using strategies to ensure internal validity including the triangulation. Triangulation between the student responses, the advisor's responses and the instructors' responses confirmed the data were true. The same themes emerged from all three sets of individuals. This strategy also ensured validity and reliability. Also, by using thick description, this researcher provides highly descriptive, detailed information of the setting and the findings of the study. Thick description allows individuals to understand the context of the study and then assess the similarity between them and the study (Merriam, 2009). Thick description is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a way of achieving a type of external validity. By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008).

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Qualitative research involves the researcher as the primary data instrument who conducts interviews, observations, and documents the findings and so it is important for a researcher to honestly evaluate and analyze their biases and assumptions having to do with the study (Merriam, 2009). One basic assumptions of this study is that the research

participants are honest and did not hold back information (for example: embarrassing information, etc.). The researcher also acknowledges that since she is inherently interested in those that succeeded at earning a degree, she may have certain esteem for the participants for having overcome barriers that stood in the way of their completion.

Limitations

Participants in this study varied in age, educational level, academic ability, socioeconomic status, life experience, work experience and motivation. One must be cautious not to treat adult students as one homogeneous group. All of the respondents were female which may limit the study's findings. The study's participants were mostly older women and they were all Caucasian. Their perspectives may not reflect those of other ethnic groups. Thus the ability to generalize this study's findings may be limited.

Delimitations

To ensure validity, this researcher designed an appropriate study to measure and draw accurate conclusions about this cohort's experience. The only drawback of this study is that since it is a convenience sample, it has the limitation of generalizability. As Vogt (2007) warns, researchers who use convenience samples should be very cautious about trying to generalize the results of their study. The study involved only community colleges in only one Midwest state.

The study focused on the experiences of a single cohort at a rural community college in the Midwest. This delimitation, according to Creswell (2007) suggests that the scope may focus on specific variables or a central phenomenon delimited to specific participants or sites, or narrowed to one type of research design. Hence, the delimitations of this study included location, as the participants were located in one Midwest state.

Summary

This chapter explained the methodology used to develop and administer a survey in the form of interviews with former members of a cohort at a community college in the Midwest. Members of the faculty and staff of the college were also interviewed to gain their perspective on the success of this cohort. Chapter 4 will detail the findings and analysis of the interviews.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The data contained in this chapter reflect the students' perspectives on the reasons for their completion. The advisor who worked closely with this group of students was also interviewed to provide her insights on this group's high completion rate. Finally, some of the instructors who taught the students were interviewed and offered additional perspectives to the discussion of this group's success. By hearing from the advisor and the instructors, the researcher wanted to confirm that the study participants were not an exceptional group of high achievers. Indeed, the data show that these students faced many of the barriers that typical non-traditional students face.

Students:

A Description of the Group

The number of student respondents was seven and it represents nearly 32 percent of the twenty-two completers. All of the respondents were female, although the cohort also included men. The following are some statistics about the group members: 27 started, 22 completed, 17 were FTIAC (first time in a college) students, 9 were returning students, and 1 was transfer student. The ages of the student participants (at the time of interview) were 58, 57, 55, 55, 53, 45, and 34. The interviews took place a year after graduation, and the students started the program two years prior to their graduation.

The participants held the following positions at the factory where they worked: there were two line leaders, two welders, one line worker, one team leader, and one press operator. Two of the women worked at the factory for ten years, two women worked there for a year and a half, one for twelve years, one for two years, and another worked there for five years. Most of these students had done only factory work in their career. Lack of academic experience explains many of the difficulties that these students faced when they started college.

The participants were also asked if they were employed and if their college education was essential in their new job. Five out of the seven respondents were employed (at the time of the interview). Of those five who are employed, four are employed in positions that required their education from the college (three of the four are employed as pharmacy technicians). One of the women said that she obtained a position within two weeks of finishing school. We can clearly see that college education helped them to find new employment opportunities.

Questions

The questions asked fit into two categories: 1. Overcoming the barriers to student success and 2. Institutional factors of student success (including Academic Advisors' role in student success, Instructors' role in student success, Learning communities, Student engagement and several other topics).

Personal reflections and student stories were also found useful for answering *the main question of this study: What helped these students succeed?*

Overcoming the Barriers to Student Success

Students were asked several questions regarding barriers to success that they might have faced and, what is more important, how they overcame those barriers.

Study Skills

Lack of academic experience and *underdeveloped study skills* were identified among major barriers to student success. Students were asked how they improved their study skills. The answers show that instructors, learning support center staff, and the advisor all helped them develop study skills: “*Instructors* taught us that people learn in different ways”. “Our instructors gave us some tips in all of our classes.” *All* students shared a common message of the importance of the *Learning Support Center* in helping them with their study skills, particularly in the subject of math. “My hardest subject is math. I did use the student assistance there a lot for math.” “I used the math *tutors*. That was really helpful.”

The *advisor* developed a series of brown bag lunches. One of those sessions covered the topic of study skills. The following are reflections the students made regarding this topic: “We worked as a study group together. The advisor had set up a program where we could go, and they taught us ways to study better, and showed us resources to use if we needed them.” “Time management was a big thing”. “I attended the brown bag meetings. I learned how to manage my time.”

Other barriers to success related to study skills were identified by students as *underdeveloped technology skills, reading disorders, inability to focus* for a long time on

the same subject and inclination towards *procrastination*. The Learning Support Center and *personal determination* helped them to overcome these barriers. All of the respondents expressed their regret that they did not devote more time to study skill development and did not use the resources available to them when they were at high school. One of the students answered: “I took my typing class when I was 15 and while I was in typing class, I thought, ‘I am never gonna use typing.’ So I really didn’t pay a lot of attention in high school and kinda just blew it off. But then when I got in college, there were computers you need to learn. Then I thought, ‘I wish I would have paid more attention.’”

Another participant expressed the challenges she faced due to her developmental reading disorder, dyslexia: “I had a hard time because of my dyslexia. I just worked through it. I didn’t have any special help. Spelling was really hard for me especially.” And another respondent regretted that she did not like to read because reading could have helped her develop the ability *to focus* on the same subject: “I did not like to read. Most of my family does and they will sit and read and read. I did not. I had to sit down and to focus on reading but my mind went in a million directions. They gave us, in that *Learning Support Center*, a lot of tips on how to focus and how to do things. But for me it was really my one shot. I had to do it, so I overcame my personal challenge and I was going to ace everything. You know, their techniques were good and they give you a lot of good advice. But for me, it was just ‘This is your shot and you are going to do it.’ I wanted to make myself and my parents proud because, at 50 years old, I was the first one to graduate from college.” Two of the students thought that *procrastination* was a major

barrier to their success. One participant said “Yes, I was good at putting things off. But I just had to do things. There was no time to do it later. You just had to do it.”

Test Taking

The next barrier to success was identified as lack of test taking skills that caused *anxiety* and lack of confidence. Students were asked how they learned skills and strategies to improve their test-taking abilities. The students attributed their success to the study skills course, the Learning Support Center, instructors’ help, and the brown bag lunches set up by the advisor.

There was a *study skills course* offered for the students to improve their study skills. It was a single credit course. Even though it was only one credit, the following feedback indicates its effectiveness: “One class I had was just a credit. She would tell you how to take tests. You know a lot of people are nervous and she would say ‘Cover up everything else except for the one question and focus on that.’ And that really did help.”

Another way students improved their study skills was by visiting the *Learning Support Center*. As one student put it, it was a very valuable resource and “The people that didn’t use it, they really struggled. But, we would just tell everyone that ‘You have to go there when you are struggling. The resources are there and everyone in there just wants you to succeed.’ I had been out of school over 30 years! They were there to help you.”

Instructors were identified as a source for improving test-taking skills also. “We would study, not just when we had a test coming up. Instead, some of the teachers would ask questions throughout the week. It was really nice because then it was in your head

and not just ‘memorize, regurgitate, and you are done.’” Another student expressed gratitude to the instructors for being accommodating in regards to her test taking fear. “I was never good at test taking, but the instructors accommodated me well.”

One of the *Brown bag lunches* facilitated by the advisor covered test taking skills: “They gave examples of how to improve our test taking skills. It was one of the brown bag lunch meetings.”

Convenience of Class Times

In national surveys of students, one of the frequent complaints is about the inconvenience of class times. So, the next question was if these students faced this challenge at their college. *All* participants said that the classes were available at convenient times for them. This is a particularly good reflection of the college since it apparently made the proper investment in courses that were convenient to their students. One student told of her experience with several deaths in her family and how the instructors helped her: “The only time I had an issue was when we had several deaths in the family while I was going to school. But everyone was very, very good about working with me and getting my work in and still coming into classes.” Having courses available to students at times that are convenient for them is essential for student success.

First Generation College Attendees

One of the well-documented barriers to success in higher education is that of first generation attendance (Myran, 2009). Almost all students in the group were first generation college attendees. Students were also asked about their parent's highest

education level. Two students had fathers that dropped out of high school but had mothers who did graduate from high school. Another two of the students had parents who both graduated from high school. One student had a mother who attended some college classes but didn't graduate and her dad did earn an associate's degree. One student said neither of her parents graduated from high school. And another student said her mother dropped out of high school, and was not sure about her father.

These students clearly did not have the advantages associated with the familial knowledge that is passed on to children regarding how to succeed in higher education. Thanks to their persistence and determination, these students were able to overcome this barrier as well.

Children and Other Dependents

Having to care for children while attending college can be a serious barrier to college completion. Several students in the group had children or others who lived with them and depended on them for their care while the students were studying. Four of the participants had grown children, one had a newly adopted infant, and another student had 3 teenage children at home.

This was the experience of one of the completers: "Our adult son just moved back after a divorce and lived at our home with his son. My husband of 35 years had a massive heart attack and was on a ventilator. For a month and a half I stayed at the hospital. I only went to classes and then did my homework at the hospital. I bought a laptop. We had no money, no insurance. I felt guilty about buying the laptop but it was the only way I could finish my studies. I thought 'If I don't do my studies, I will lose my unemployment and

we will have nothing, even if he does come home.’ I rode together with another gal to save on gas. My classmate’s husband shot a deer and gave us deer meat so we could make it through. You just do what you have to do.”

Another woman said that she and her husband received their adopted child while she was working on her education at the college. She recounted her story saying, “We have a 3 year old son whom we adopted. We got him when he was 11 months old while I was going to college. Taking care of him was hard.” Another student recollects how hard but beneficial it was to combine studying and taking care of her children: “With my kids being older, I had to realize that there really are some things they can do on their own. But it was more the mom in me just having a harder time letting go of some things. Study time would usually be in the morning when I go over the kids’ work while they are having breakfast. In the afternoons, we would all four sit at the table to do homework together. There would be other study and homework times where I would help them with their studies and they would take my paper and ask me questions.”

These students overcame many challenges and these brief vignettes show what many non-traditional community college students go through. It is also a testimony that people can complete even when they have serious challenges if their efforts are supported by college and family.

Their determination and their *inner strength* were revealed in their stories of the challenges they faced while attending college. The care of children, ill loved ones, and the other challenges that life presented them with did not stop them from completing. They came to college with weak study skills, poor test-taking skills, disabilities, and lack of technology skills. But they overcame their barriers and completed their studies.

Challenged to Complete

The next question was about a time when students thought they weren't going to make it. When was that? What made the difference? What helped them to continue? The following responses show that the students tapped "internal resources," the advisor, the other group members, and family and instructors' support to help them through those times.

Coursework was a challenge for the following student, but with the help of her *cohort mates*, she persisted. "My medical terminology class was pretty difficult for me because of spelling (this is the student who has dyslexia). Our 'clique' helped. We just kept pushing each other." Another respondent said that her family's support helped her persist. "My husband supported me a lot; especially having the baby in the house. It was challenging sometimes, especially when I had to write papers."

The students were also asked the following question: "Was there a time when you realized that you **were** going to make it? When was that? What made the difference? The students' responses varied greatly and included inner strength, the advisor, their peers, and the instructors. *The most cited source of strength for these students was their fellow group members*: "There were a lot of others from the factory in my classes so that really helped having those people. We kinda *worked together*. We would meet in the computer room sometimes for some of the classes and we were *together* in a lot of *the same classes*. That really helped, having that friendship and that feeling that we can do this."

Another student also found strength and encouragement from her group mates and other students at the college: “The more encouragement I got, the more I believed it. After math, I understood it was going to be alright. A young student, not from our factory, helped us understand how to do math, improve our writing, and he gave us study tips.” And this student talked about the power of belief. “Because *we were all together*, we just put it in our heads that none of us were gonna fail. We were getting through this no matter what. So, we just pushed a little bit more.”

Personal determination helped the following student: “I made a commitment, you know, they were paying for it (the student refers to the TRA and TAA financial support that made their studies possible). I made a commitment, and I was going to do it... I was scared to death but I was bound and determined to do it.” Another student gives credit to their advisor: “The advisor gave me a lot of confidence to continue.”

The following story tells of how an *instructor* not only helped the student persist, but helped her discover her vocational “calling”: “I was in my English, I think it was, and there is a teacher there who is incredible. One day he said, ‘Well since you seem to know this so very well, how about you teach the class?’ I got up there and I did it my way. I wrote out parts of things on the board. I made it interactive. The instructor told me that I am going to be a very good teacher one day. Originally, I went for counseling and then after that, I said, ‘You know what, I absolutely love doing this and that is what I am going to do.’ And that is when I realized I am going to make it.”

In summary, much of the completion success, according to these student accounts, was directly related to the *support services* that the college provided. The *advisor* was highly instrumental in providing the students with the necessary guidance to *resources* as

well as being a source of *encouragement* for the students. The students also mentioned their *cohort mates* and other students as being extremely important to their persistence and completion. *The bonds that developed in this cohort were particularly strong and cited frequently as a source of their perseverance.* High quality *instructors* who made themselves available to the students both in class and out of class also made a significant impact on these students' completion. Many recounted the personal interest in the students' success that was conveyed by the instructors. Numerous instructors also served the students in the *Learning Support Center*. The assistance the students received through that center were essential to their success, according to the students.

The college made wise investments in support services for this group of students. Data analysis clearly shows the significance of these investments for these students' retention and completion.

Institutional Factors of Student Success

The following section highlights the students' responses to the question: What are the things that the college did that made the greatest contribution to your completion? The assignment of the *advisor* to the group was the most frequently mentioned factor. The second most cited factor was the *instructors*. The third was the *students*- in particular their cohort members. The students also mentioned the importance of the *Learning Support Center*, *Student support services*, *their learning community*, and *engagement* as factors that contributed significantly to their success.

Academic Advisors' Role in Student Success

All respondents expressed their unanimous opinion that their advisor was the most important factor that helped them succeed.

The students in this group were all assigned *the same* advisor that they were supposed to work with at the college. The respondents expressed their appreciation for having *one* advisor assigned to them: “It was the best part of our experience because *if you had to bounce around from advisor to advisor, they would not get to know you personally*. But as a group, she knew where we came from, what we wanted to accomplish, and that we factory people all stuck together. As a group, we stuck together studying with each other, pushing each other... Our advisor was the best because had we talked to all different advisors, they would have been sending us in all different directions, not getting to know us as well as she did. We knew we just talked to her and that was great. She focused on your success and that is the only thing. She is perfect.”

The students noted that the advisor was largely responsible for their awareness about the *services* available to them. “When we came here, the advisor made sure we knew every resource that was available to us. If we came to her and said, ‘You know, I can’t write this paper, I just don’t understand’, she would direct us in the right way. *If you didn’t know where to go, you just went to the advisor*. She directed you exactly where you needed to go. She made phone calls and said, ‘You know, I am sending this person. This is their struggle. Please work with them’. Our advisor was our star. Let me tell ya, she was. *She made sure you knew every resource*.”

The students also emphasized the *encouragement* that they received from their advisor: “She helped me believe in myself.” “The constant encouragement helped a lot. She believed in me. That was the most important.” Another student said, “I don’t think I would have made it without her. It would have been really a lot harder. She was like a cheerleader. She said ‘You guys can do this. You’re not the traditional students just coming out of high school but this is what you can do. And I believe in you.’ Without her, I probably would have gotten discouraged.”

The following are the perceptions of the students about the *advisor’s assistance* in helping them through their college experience. “Giving us the advisor was most helpful. It helped because she knew where we were going and what we wanted to accomplish. Anytime we needed her, she was there.” “That academic advisor I had was awesome. She kind of held my hand.” “She was excellent! You know she sat down and showed me what was available in my two years. So I thought ‘I’d like to try this’ and she was really *supportive*. She really had to fight to find me classes at the right times.”

Several students remember how their advisor helped them *in a time of crisis*. One student recounted the challenges that arose when family issues pulled her in many directions. “When my grandma died (she had cancer and I had to spend several weeks with her helping settle her affairs) I was trying to do my classes. I really wondered if I was going to make it or if I should just give up and do factory work again. I went to the student advisor. *She made the difference*. It was her. I cried in her office. *She was very encouraging. She listened*. I hate pity parties and she did really, really well with not giving me the pity party. *She was just listening...* If it weren’t for her, I think I would have lost it that year. She gave me just enough of a push with an attentive ear. *Instead of*

focusing on that moment, I was looking ahead.” Another student talked about her struggles right at the beginning of her college experience: “When I first started I told the advisor that I couldn’t do it. And she said, ‘Just relax; we can take care of this’. She was excellent. She made me feel so much better. She made me feel ‘*You can do this.*’ And I thought, ‘You’re right, I can.’”

The feedback from the students shows the value of the *one-on-one trusting relationship* that was established. The advisor knew each student by name, had an *individual education plan* for each, and developed special support (brown bag lunch meetings) to help them with their transition to the new environment. The advisor helped them *build up their self-esteem* so that they could succeed. As they put it, “The advisor was excellent. She kinda took our group under her wing.”

The students were also asked several specific questions regarding the role their advisor played in their success. The participants were first asked “Did your advisor help you set goals and create a plan to achieve them?” *All* students recount what an essential part she played in their education planning and completion.

One student talks about the *individual attention* she received from the advisor. “She said this is what you can take and this is what I’d like you to try, and she really worked with us so much.” Another student confirms this experience saying, “I am telling you, that woman is amazing. She worked with every one of us.” Each student had an *individualized education plan*. This plan laid out exactly which classes they had to have each semester. This student also appreciated the fact that the advisor helped them with *good scheduling*. “She planned our classes well so we wouldn’t have huge breaks in between classes. She made everything smooth.” The advisor also reminded the students

that they had to keep progressing (otherwise they could have lost their funding at the end of the two years).

The next question was about whether or not their advisor talked with them about their commitments outside of class and helped them to figure out how to *balance their responsibilities*. These students were all grown women, rather than young students. Their perceptions about how to cope with responsibilities varied. The following students recounted how the advisor helped them manage: “Our advisor helped us with *time management*. She helped us write out our schedules and we ended up with more time than we thought.” “Yes our advisor helped when I had all of those problems with my grandma and mom and everything.”

Answering the question “How *important* to your experience was it to have the advisor available to you?” *all* respondents said that she was essential to their success. The following accounts show their perceptions of the essential role the advisor played in their college experience.

Students repeatedly refer to the advisor's *availability*. Their advisor was particularly accommodating and generous with her time. “Oh my gosh, she was wonderful. She really took the time with us. She really helped us out.” Speaking of the benefits of having an assigned advisor, one student shared her insights: “The best resource we had was our advisor. Anytime we had a problem, we went to her and she would tell us where to go or she would fix it. So, she was supportive in every way. I mean our personal life even, whatever. If she knew we had a problem, she was always there. She is amazing.” Another student also refers to the generosity that was shown to this group. “The advisor was important because we could go in there whenever. Because

of the programs we were in (TRA and TAA), we had papers that we had to have signed every week. *She was always available* for us when we needed to talk to her for that minute or whatever. It was no big deal to make an appointment.”

Several students talked about the fact that *they persisted because they had their advisor*. One student says she would not have continued, had it not been for the advisor: “It would have never happened if I wouldn’t have met her, the very first day I met her to sign up for classes. She believes in every single person. She’s a very loving woman.”

These students’ accounts point to the fact that *their advisor was essential to their completion*. She encouraged them, made time for them, was accommodating to them, cared for them and was supportive of them. This advisor helped them in every way to complete their programs of study.

Instructors’ Role in Student Success

Members of this cohort believe that *their instructors were the second most important factor that helped them succeed*.

The respondents talked about their experience with their instructors from the perspective of *non-traditional students*. “Most of our teachers were *very understanding*. We are non-traditional students, a lot of us, coming from our factory. They were always available for us. They helped especially with math, because a lot of people had problems with math.” “Our most wonderful math teacher explained everything. I learned a lot of things. And our first English teacher... He became one of my favorite teachers. *He opened my eyes to some things that my mind was closed to.*” Another respondent talked about how the experience was not only important to them as non-traditional students, but

also as an experience for the instructors who might not have been exposed to so many older learners before: “There are some people that haven’t been to school in a very long time. I believe *the instructors were learning as we were learning.*”

Laughing, students talked about how their instructors encouraged them saying, “Even though you’re old, college isn’t just for the young.” “There was one professor who was so good. She took a lot of *extra time* with us and helped us prepare for our state exams.”

One student recounts the *responsiveness* she felt from the faculty. “The faculty was just amazing. We could get in groups and *they listened to us*. What would make your experience better? Anything we needed, they would get us. They took *a lot of time* to make sure we succeeded.”

Almost all instructors were also sensitive to the fact that many of these non-traditional students had other life commitments that competed for their time and energy. This *understanding* showed toward these students made a serious impression on them: “I was a mom, and a Girl Scout leader, and a daughter to a parent who for three years needed a lot of assistance, due to a stroke. They were very, very flexible with it. My grades didn’t suffer if I had to turn something in on a different date as long as I got a hold of someone ahead of time. Sometimes they would let me attend a different class period than my normal period if I had to work, help my parents or the kids.”

However, not all instructors demonstrated understanding. The following story is from a student who went through a tremendous number of challenges and had a difficult time with one of her instructors: “Yes, all of the instructors wanted us to succeed. Almost everybody was encouraging and helpful. But I did have one teacher basically tell me that

he didn't believe me about everything that was going on. Here is what happened. So, my mom had a stroke. Two weeks later, I get the call about my grandmother. I had to go and take care of her. That lasted for 3 weeks. At the end of 3 weeks, my husband was having some issues. He got diagnosed with severe Graves' disease and Type I Diabetes. My oldest son developed an issue with his throat where they had to take out his tonsils and his adenoids because he wasn't breathing right. So, he had to have surgeries for that. All of this happened altogether within a matter of weeks. It was a lot. So, to the teacher, it looked like excuse after excuse after excuse. So, he told me he wanted proof of everything. I had to spend almost an entire week, a lot of it was driving or it was waiting. So, getting all of this documentation and turning it in, I was very upset. You know, this is not the kind of thing people make up. I said, 'Why would someone want to make it up?' Until I turned in the documentation, I was a fail on his class. Once I turned it in, then I would get my normal grades..."

Another student's experience demonstrates the need for instructors *to be aware of the skills* of non-traditional students. "I remember in the first semester we had a class. That teacher assumed everybody was born with a computer in their lap and so she was whipping off all of this stuff and I'm going, 'Um, I barely know how to turn a computer on'. I was to the point in that class that it is like, 'Nope, if this is the way it is going to be, I ain't coming back.' It is hard enough to be 55+ and get thrown back in school. Yeah, I knew there were computers out there, but they just assumed everyone knew all about them. Wrong!"

In order to better understand the role that the instructors played in the experience of these students, the students were asked whether they felt that their instructors wanted

them to succeed. There were many instructors that the students said were excellent and went out of their way to help the students. But there were also a few who treated them as traditional students and did not go the extra mile to help. A student who had very limited computer skills said, “Yes, definitely, the instructors wanted us to succeed. I had a bit of trouble in my computer class. That was my first class in my first semester. I kinda struggled with that. But we had a tutor that would help us with computer things. I depended on him a lot to pass that class.”

The following student liked her instructors and the *small college atmosphere* that she thinks was important for her success. “I think all the instructors wanted us to succeed. I had seen on TV where they had these big colleges where you walk into a big lecture and the teacher walks out and says ‘This is what you do’. That was my impression of a college. But when I got here, it was like ‘If you don’t understand this, come see me’. You know we have the Learning Support Center where there are teachers available to help you succeed. And I thought, ‘This is great, this is exactly what I needed.’”

Some students had both good and not so good instructors. “They are a mixed breed. They are just like anywhere else. Some of them cared less. One awesome instructor, she goes, ‘Oh my God, you guys come in here and it is like trying to teach my mother.’ So I e-mailed her when we all graduated and I said, ‘Hey, you know what, we are done, and you won’t have us anymore.’ We had her for like every semester for something. She goes, ‘I feel like such a proud mama...’ And there were some that just didn’t care. They would just get through the class. ‘Here is what you do’. The same whether you are 18 or 58. It didn’t matter, ‘this is what you do’. But many of them did

say, if you are having trouble, let me know. I am available at such and such a time. Or this lab is available or that lab is available...”

The students were also asked if their instructors *clearly explained* their *expectations* in the classes. The overwhelming answer to this question was ‘yes’. A few of the students shared more of their thoughts on this subject. One student talked about the importance of the syllabus clearly defining the instructors’ expectations for their classes. “They had the syllabus that told you exactly what they expected from you and what you needed to accomplish. That really helped having that in print so you could see- this is what I need to do.” The respondents clearly understood what their instructors expected of them, and that helped the students know how they could successfully complete their required coursework. One student was challenged to persist by her math class: “I think when I first went into the math, I never did math with the alphabet, and it was really weird. The instructor took her time with me. She would meet with you any time, in class, after class, or online. You could call her at any time. They just encouraged you.”

On the whole, the students indicated that most of their instructors did want them to succeed and made themselves available to the students for supplementary help. But students also indicated that other instructors didn’t consider the fact that they were non-traditional students with particular challenges and strengths.

Fellow Students

Although not necessarily part of an institutional effort, study participants mentioned *their cohort members and other students at the college as the third most important factor that helped them to succeed*. Several respondents recount the positive

interactions between the older students and younger students. “When I was struggling, luckily, we had a couple of high school kids in that class. The one day that we went to the computer lab, that student had forgot a flash drive, so, she really couldn’t work on her stuff. So, she got to help me. I had so much fun working with her because she was explaining the stuff and showed me how to do things. I mean, it was fun because she was a high school kid and I’m nearly old enough to be her grandma.”

Besides *getting* help from the younger students, the older students also felt they were *giving* something to the younger ones as noted in the following example: “The students made us feel welcome, even the young ones. When we would break up in groups, we were like, ‘Great, no one is going to want these old people’ but they would want to know about our life experiences. And it was fun to learn about their life, and they liked talking to us.”

Another student says that she found value in the *student council* experience. “I would have to say I loved the student council. Yes, the leadership part was interesting. It was nice to try to recruit people. It was nice meeting with people from different areas of life. It gives me different ideas on how to approach things too.”

Several students mentioned being members of the National Honor Society. This *student organization* looks for individuals who have demonstrated intellectual integrity, tolerance for other views, and a broad range of academic interests. By their membership, the students demonstrated a transformation in their academic development.

Respondents also cite encounters with their *cohort members* as very valuable for creating *team spirit*, when everyone wanted the whole group to succeed: “For our math and our tests, we would always be in the Learning Support Center together. We worked

in groups. We helped each other.” Another student echoes this comment: “I had the support of the other factory ladies and we all walked down the hall together and sat together. After the first week it was much better. After the second week I started thinking ‘I like this’. My colleagues’ support and encouragement helped.” This *mutual support within the group* proved to be especially valuable *in times of crisis*. “There is always a time when you think that you are not going to make it. The good thing about our group was a lot of them went for the same program. There was a group of us that were basically in the same classes about the same time. We would get together at somebody’s house and we would study. We would go to the computer lab together.”

Overall, these students noted the importance of other students to their success. Be it their responsiveness, their assistance, their interactions, or their shared service responsibilities, they found comfort and strength in their relationships with other students.

The Learning Support Center

The students spoke of the significance of the *Learning Support Center* in their successful completion. The center is constantly mentioned in their comments related to other questions. “The Learning Support Center was one of the biggest things that helped me. The teachers would tell us when they would be in the Learning Support Center and we could go talk to them.” *Feeling welcome* is important when seeking assistance. One woman said “The Learning Support Center was amazing and all of the teachers made us feel welcome.” “I used them for my writing class. I was beside myself thinking about writing papers. I was very afraid. The writing tutors helped a lot, and my professors.”

Student Support Services

Student support services play an essential role in the non-academic aspects of the college experience and can provide the links to help students who may be struggling. The students were asked whether or not they were aware of the support services available to them (for example: tutoring, financial aid, computer lab, student organizations, career counseling, academic advising, and writing lab assistance). Thanks to their advisor, *all* of the students were aware of the services and made use of them. The most cited response to this question was “I used them all.” One student talked about the importance of the support services, and how members of their group utilized the assistance together: “We used everything available to us. We would be out here early and stay late. We could focus better here than at home.”

Overall, the students talked about how necessary these student services were to their success. Getting students to access the services in community colleges is an ongoing challenge for many institutions. But for these students, *having a personal invitation and connection made the difference.*

Classes with Practical Orientation

Unlike traditional students who are rarely concerned about this matter, non-traditional students are more likely to succeed if they feel that what they learn has a lot of *practical value*. When asked how practical their classes were, the students agreed that they felt the classes were practical. Some noted that at the time they didn’t understand why they needed certain subjects that they were required to take, but eventually they understood. Making the coursework practical really helped the following student in her

everyday life: “I know that it’s important to know math for pharmacy, but why do you need all that stuff to get your degree? Like speech? It helps you communicate in public. Everything that we had was needed. You may not know at the time that you need it. But when you look back at it, you realize you use it every day.” One student’s answer was very brief and comprehensive: “Very practical. It got me where I am at now.”

Learning Communities

Learning communities help students by providing *social support* and a *sense of unity* and strength from the group. So, the students in this study were asked about their learning community and its impact on their completion. Although this group wasn’t in a true learning community by most definitions, the group members were frequently (intentionally) scheduled to take courses together and have common lunch times, etc. The advisor did this so that they could bond and give support as they went through this process as a group.

Several students likened the learning community experience to *being on a team*. “It means having people all *working together*. You’re like a team, all working together to succeed. You cheer each other on.” “Working, especially in a shop, it is teamwork. So we were all aware of the teamwork idea.” Another student said, “When you commit to being a team member, you have to stay committed since the team depends on you.”

The following students show their understanding and appreciation for the learning orientation at the college. “The whole environment here is very learning oriented. There are *resources* everywhere here. There are *study groups*. You could ask anybody anything whether you knew them or not. It is very supportive. You have all the support here you

need to succeed.” The following students appreciated the *mutual support* within the group: “Yes, I felt like part of a learning community because we were all there, all ages, all shapes, all colors, all there for the same reason: to learn and *to encourage one another.*” Another student echoes this comment: “Being in classes together, we got that chance to really know each other way better and we learned how to push and how not to push and where to go.”

Students felt support not only from their cohort members, but also from the other students. Their definitions of a learning environment involved a nurturing atmosphere where students helped one another, instructors were available and encouraging, and where they could get all the academic support they needed.

Student Engagement

As Tinto suggested, the more engaged students are, the more likely they are to succeed at college. To explore the role student engagement may have played in the experience of this group, the students were asked several questions. When asked if they felt welcome at the college, the students expressed their anxiety at being older students and feeling somewhat out of place. But they continue and talk about quickly overcoming those feelings. One student took the initiative to have a tour of the college (in advance of starting). Despite their non-traditional status as students, they felt welcome. “Yes, there is like such a huge age span everywhere. And because of how interwoven and small the classes were, everybody worked together regardless of age, gender, background.” The blending of young and old, factory worker and high school graduate, grandparent and grandchild perspectives made the learning environment rich with opportunity.

Another question regarding engagement was related to the *brown bag lunches* which offered specific skill sessions, support and adjustment topics. Most of the students attended and found them useful. The following student talks about engagement from the perspective of *friendship* and *trust* in their group that developed from the brown bag lunch sessions: “Yes, we got camaraderie. It was mostly our people and, you know, some were very friendly, just like in regular life.” A couple of students noted that the *brown bag lunches served more than skill building sessions*. They served as support sessions. “I attended all brown bag lunches. They had a topic, and if you had a specific need, that was where we would go. If you had other concerns, we branched off and took care of other needs as they arose.” The students’ feedback indicates that these sessions were helpful and provided them with the ability and support to make the adjustment.

Personal Reflections

In order to encourage the students to share their educational experience, they were asked to reflect on some questions that explored what they achieved, besides their formal education and degree. The students were asked “What do you want others to know about this experience?” Their responses are very encouraging and speak of the possibilities that exist if you have the right support. Having understanding instructors and other support was essential to students’ success: “*You can do it*. Going to school here, you got a lot of support.”

Managing fear and tapping resources helped students through: “You can do whatever you choose. If you put your mind to it, you can do it. *You know, the resources are there; the support is there*. You have to overcome your inner fears.” Another student’s words support this message: “*Anybody can do it*. You don’t have to be afraid. I

tell everybody now.” Overcoming fear is a common theme that the students refer to in their advice to others. They all agreed that people at college wanted them to succeed and were willing to assist them in every possible way. Fear can be overcome.

Reflecting on the rewards of hard work, students thought that it was worth the investment. “Life happens and things aren’t there to be easy. *If it was easy, it wouldn’t have any great reward at the end.* When things are hard, you learn to appreciate how much effort you yourself put into it, and it means more to you. You can look at it with more pride. When you really have to struggle and push and you know you have put effort into it, it is worthwhile and you remember that forever and so do your friends and your family.”

It was already mentioned that among the factors that helped these students to succeed was not only the development of study skills but their general personal development. *Education helped them to improve their views and their improved views in turn influenced their success in education.* Answering the question “Has this experience impacted other parts of your personal life?” the students mentioned an *increased confidence* as a result of their studies. “I think I am more confident now. Because I think, I can take on the world now. I can succeed. I tell other people, ‘You can do this.’”

Students explained that *their perspectives changed as a result of their educational experience.* As one of them put it, “*I opened my mind up to a lot of new things.* I have a bigger, open mind.” This student had a similar message to share: “I have become more open. I am more accepting of everyone.” Another student’s experience may be useful for the next cohort of students: “I am more compassionate about people going back to school because I have the experience, and I know it’s not easy. But I know it can be done. Take

breaks. Plot out your studies. Set time limits. Work for a couple of hours and take a break for half an hour. Then, when you come back to it, your brain is a little fresher. You can get through it a lot easier. I learned this the hard way. I tried to do everything one right after the next...”

Another student also talked about her *personal development* through her educational experience at college: “I am more confident. I feel so much more successful. This opportunity was the best thing that ever happened to me. It was a tough time; trust me. It was hard to do, but I completed something that was big for me. This was a great experience.” And another student agreed saying, “I know now that *I can do anything I set my mind to* if I want it bad enough.”

Not everyone was rooting for their success, explains another student. “Our boss at the plant we worked at, when he found out we were all going to college, said, ‘Well, there is a bunch of wasted tax dollar money because you’re factory workers’. We had to go through the state for our program. When we went to the state agency to meet with them for the first time, they said, ‘You guys aren’t going to school, you are factory workers. You need to find a job. You can’t go to school’, and we told them, ‘Yes we can. We are eligible to go to school and the only way we are going to succeed now is to get education. We are going to school’. That was a big fight. Funny thing is that, in the end, I was honored as one of their agency success stories!”

Another student shares the story of her transformation that may be very instructive to future students (she had these reflections in writing and gave permission to share the story).

“It was a cold January day two thousand and eight. The plant manager walks into the room full of assembly line workers. He starts by saying ‘There is no easy way to say this so I will just say it. This plant will be closing by the end of the year.’ With those few words all 160 lives in that plant changed. Most workers in that plant were over the age of thirty. With the circumstance of the closing and the economy failing most dislocated workers opted for returning to college. This presented its own unique set of obstacles for the college and the students. Going from working on an assembly line mindlessly following directions not questioning for fear of disciplinary action, to a student where one is asked to think for themselves, question everything, dissect every idea and concept presented to them. This was a problem for most because of an invisible barrier called ‘habit of mind’. These new students had to understand this ‘habit of mind’ and the barriers it created in order to transform into a college student with an open mind free to explore new ideas and concepts.

For the college instructors it was also a challenge to make these new students aware of this ‘frame of reference’ they had, and why they had to open their minds to new ideas. As Jack Mezirow, Professor Emeritus of Adult and Continuing Education, wrote,

“A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others, facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of adult

education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking. (Mezirow, 1997, p.5)

The work environment they left was a strict one with rules that could not be broken. In this factory life one's day was always the same. The buzzer would sound and you started the mindless work repeating a process several hundred or even thousands of times in a day. When the buzzer sounded you took a break, went to the bathroom, or were finished for the day, no thought required. The educational system we grew up with creates one of our biggest barriers in adult learning.

There were six of these dislocated workers in this class. Many students were having a very hard time and would not consider any other point of view. The instructor told one student she was in a cocoon and she needed to let go of those old ideas to become a butterfly. This student was very offended by those words. She was very comfortable in that cocoon that had kept her safe for over fifty years.

After reading many articles from these authors and others, something started to change for this and the other students. Education was more than just 'memorize and repeat' like previously thought. Education was something to explore, expand and own. Once this barrier was understood it could not control these students anymore. When these new students opened their eyes to their 'habit of mind' they went from factory worker to adult student. Once this barrier was broken a transformation took place. The butterflies spread their wings and flew to new heights. In order for these new students to be successful they must be

deprogrammed if you will, from factory worker to student starting from the first semester. If this does not happen right away the students can struggle and give up, missing out on revising their life.

As I look down these corridors, I see the faces of the future, some are young, fresh out of high school, but many are older trying to revise their life and in order to do this they must revise their frame of reference and understand the filters that can keep them from reaching their full academic goals. What looked like the end for many dislocated workers has become the beginning.”

By hearing stories like this, one better understands these individuals and the psychological barriers that they had to overcome.

The students told the story of the *personal development* that happened to them and affected other parts of their lives. They did not just acquire better study skills. They conquered fear, gained confidence, became more compassionate, and developed pride in themselves. They were *changed by college* in very positive ways. When asked “Do you have any plans to continue studying in the future?” *all* of them noted that they would be interested in continuing to learn, if not formally, at least informally. One of the students said, “I have a hunger now. I have a thirst. I have a thirst for knowledge.”

There was a combination of factors that aligned correctly and helped these factory workers to complete their college program. The students mentioned their advisor, their instructors, other students, the Learning Support Center, the brown bag lunches, their commitment to the group, family support, inner strength, clear plans and personal drive as reasons for their success.

The Advisor

The following data were gathered through an interview with the advisor who worked with this group of students. The decision to hear from her was made in order to determine if this group of students was just an extraordinarily bright group, or if they indeed were typical non-traditional students who overcame the well-known barriers to success.

History

College administrators quickly realized that they should have a single contact person to simplify the whole process for these former factory workers. The appointed advisor determined that these students would need some help in their transition to the higher education environment since it was very different from the culture of the factory. The program that was funding their education required that the students would attend school full-time, year-round or lose their funding. So the goal was to have the students complete six consecutive semesters, earning at least 12 credits per semester.

The advisor met with each of the students to select a program that they would be able to complete within the time constraints of their funding source. Many students chose career-oriented programs that would allow them to be immediately employable after completion. The advisor thought that this group of students would benefit from a *cohort style of learning*. So she purposely scheduled, whenever she could, *common classes and common breaks* so that the students would see familiar faces and *bond with one another*. She also arranged topical *brown bag lunches* so that the students could gain information in a casual manner during lunch. The topics of these brown bags lunches included:

Registering for classes, Time management, Stress management, Getting along with professors, and Writing papers. These sessions were regularly attended by about half of the students. Mostly, the students just wanted to talk and share their experiences. By the third semester, it was no longer necessary to arrange these sessions since the students had already bonded and were meeting on their own to help one another. *They formed their own study groups and informal support groups.* One of the useful tools that developed from within the group (with no help from the advisor) was a “Peer to Peer” Resource Binder. It was a binder filled with information about resources and other support services available to them.

Advisor’s Insights

The following is a summary of the interview with the advisor who was assigned to work with this group of students. First, the advisor was asked about the barriers the members of this cohort faced. She said the barriers were lack of academic preparedness, age, poor technology skills, and a long time away from school.

The advisor thought that *personal drive, motivation, financial support, and specific time requirements for completion* helped this group of students to complete their programs. What seemed to help keep the students progressing was also the *required attendance verification* needing to be signed weekly and the *required follow up visits with the state agency* that was managing the retraining program funds. Because they had their *tuition and books paid* for, the students didn’t need to work a second job to pay for college. She identified this as a real advantage over the average student who must work and study at the same time. Another advantage identified by the advisor was that these students were *required* to meet with her before registering for classes (many traditional

students do not do this regularly). This ensured that they were registering for the classes listed in their *individual education plan* in the order they needed to be completed so that the students could meet their programs' requirements.

When the advisor was asked "What did the faculty and staff do that made the greatest contribution to their completion?" she responded that the faculty *believed in them* and their ability to succeed. The college also had a very good *support system* for the students. Of equal importance was that they had to stay within the confines of their *individual education plans*.

When asked "Do you feel that you bonded with any of the students in particular?" she explained that the *students felt very close to her*. She said even after graduation, they regularly send her e-mails and are friends with her on Facebook.

The advisor was next asked "How did the policies, programs, and student support services of the college contribute to the success of the students in the cohort?" She said she believes that assigning a *single advisor* was very effective since they could bond with just one person, and wouldn't have to run around, getting confused, searching for answers. Being part of a *cohort*, she states, was also very beneficial to the students' success. The *Learning Support Center* and the *professors* being willing to help students *one-on-one* also made a significant difference to these students. The *brown bag lunches* were also beneficial to the students and their adjustment to college.

The reflections of the advisor mirror many of the stories of the students. She concludes that having one advisor assigned, having excellent and understanding instructors, tight requirements, an individual plan, support services, financial support,

personal drive, and peer assistance, all helped this group overcome their barriers and achieve their educational goals.

The Instructors

Although the focus of this research study is on the students' perceptions of their success, the researcher also wanted to verify that this cohort of students wasn't simply a talented group. So, some of the instructors that worked with this group were interviewed. The following is a summary of those interviews with the instructors. The interviews were held to see what insights the instructors might have about this group's success.

What Instructors Saw as Barriers to Student Success

Speaking of *barriers to student success* one instructor identifies *lack of confidence* and *lack of familiarity with the higher education culture* as major barriers these students faced. "I think there were a few different things that I noticed struggles with. The lack of familiarity with the academic discourse- how things are done or how things are, you know, approached, discussed, or talked about. I think that those popped up early on and there was some work that needed to be done to get over those barriers."

Another instructor identified *poor memory* (because of advanced age) and *poor time management skills* as barriers that these students had to overcome: "One of the barriers was- they can't remember anything. Just getting them to memorize things and order of operations pretty much is the biggest thing. Other things like their home life had them involved in different situations. But managing their time, scheduling their time to get things done, was a barrier."

A technology instructor commented about their *lack of computing skills* being a barrier as these students entered college. “The primary barrier that these students experienced was lack of basic knowledge and understanding of using a computer. *Basic skills* such as the ability to use and surf the internet, to use word processors, spreadsheet programs, or presentation programs *were just not there*. They had very little if any experience using any of those. Some of them told me that they worked in a factory for 20 or 30 years and they never had to use a computer before.”

The *social barriers* that the group faced were noted by the following instructor: “Well, I think what primarily affected them was the majority of their classmates were freshmen in college, straight out of high school. The *age* range we are talking is like 18 to 21 and most of these were in their 30s to 50s. The young students had all the education fresh from high school and then came directly to college so they just had to adjust to a new environment. For example, most of the students coming out of high school use texting on their phone. The people from the factory, some of them didn’t even have cell phones. That is an example of *technology era differences*. Then they had to adapt to all of these students and the way they think and the way they act and do work that was different than what these people had at their workplace. *They might have felt like outcasts*”. Thinking about what helped non-traditional students to overcome these barriers to success the instructor said, “I’ve noticed that *older students*, most of the time, *have a better work ethic* than the ones directly out of high school.”

The following instructor emphasizes the crucial role of the *Learning Support Center* for student success: “I think this affects more than just the students from the factory but they would be a prime example of people who would be affected by this. The

college's introductory level computer class assumes the student is coming in with basic computer knowledge. We do not have an introductory course that teaches very, very basic fundamental computer skills, such as using an internet browser, making a folder, saving files, and things of that nature. It is assumed that students learned those things in high school. These students come in and say, 'I don't know how to turn a computer on. What is a right click?' Unfortunately, for us instructors, we can't slow down the entire class for a few people. So it is difficult because we must keep the class on pace and we must keep it going and these people just keep falling behind. I think that [one-on-one] *tutoring* really *helped* because then they could go [to the Learning Support Center] and get help."

Students Who are Likely to Graduate

When asked "What characteristics of students, who are more likely to graduate, did you see in this particular cohort?" one instructor said that he noticed "...the willingness to tackle things head on and the drive to continue even after running into problems". "*They didn't give up. They went out and looked for different ways that they could understand things or talk about things. They didn't just isolate learning to something that happened in 75 to 85 minutes of class. They went beyond. I think that was pretty consistent for nearly everyone that I ran into. It was refreshing.*" This instructor also talked about these students being *open to learning*. "They embraced this as a real opportunity. They were open to the experience."

Determination and the *drive to succeed* are major characteristics that another instructor noted: "Willingness to persist and do whatever it takes. One student that I am thinking of, I helped her for four semesters to do two classes because she had to retake it.

But by the time she was done with that fourth semester, she got it. She has what is called dyscalculia. That is like dyslexia but with math. She was tested and everything and she finally got through everything. She spent probably 20 to 25 hours a week in the Learning Support Center to get through math.” He also noted that these students were willing to reach out for help: “*They asked for help. That is the biggest thing.*” Another instructor echoes this comment: “I have experience with other students who refuse to get help, even when they need it. These cohort members realized they needed help and would always make sure that they got it. *Those were the ones that I think did well.*”

Instructors’ Contributions to Students’ Completion

The following faculty member doesn’t take much credit for having contributed to students’ success. He does say, however, that he helped them by *encouraging* them and being *available* to them. “I think they needed a friendly face and they needed to be reassured that they were going to get it. Even if they didn’t get it right away, they were going to figure it out. It was just going to take some time and it was ok... I think one of the things that I have noticed is kind of a precursor for success is this classroom dynamic and how willing students are to engage and talk and consider things and disagree with one another. I vividly remember every week of that semester and that is the single most positive classroom experience I’ve had since I started teaching.” Another instructor echoes these comments and talks about engaging the students by being available and points to the importance of *personal relationships* with students: “I can only speak for myself. I was *open to their questions*... I was known as the ‘non-traditional’ instructor. I did as much as I could to *eliminate barriers between student and instructor* and brought it to a more personal level. I used my personal stories *to bond with them* and inspire them.

It was equally challenging for me as an instructor as it was for them. I, of course, was open to learning and *I learned a lot too through working with them.*”

The following response highlights instructors’ willingness to give *individual attention* to students as well as willingness to accommodate *different learning styles*: “If I saw that they were struggling, let’s say with a particular assignment, I could be a little more specific. Sometimes I would have to sit with students and work with them through an entire assignment from beginning to end, just to make sure they were grasping it. Sometimes the students would learn better through a hands-on, visual approach than they would do reading the material. And others could read the material and understand it better than if you just told them.”

Another instructor saw his contribution to students’ success through developing their *confidence*: “You know, I feel like the one thing I accomplished that I feel really good about is that I gave them some confidence and their own voices in learning. And I feel like I reinforced the idea that they were all very capable academically. All of those skills that they had before, they still had. They just needed to repurpose them and they could still apply them.”

The following instructor’s response indicates a willingness to *make adjustments* because these students were non-traditional: “I think I made adjustments and changes in the process as things went along. The students were spread out across three counties so I integrated class time so the groups could *work together*. Not all my colleagues would do that.”

The instructors’ commitment was essential to this group’s success. Engaging with the students, encouraging the students, being available to the students, meeting the

individual needs of the students, and challenging the students to grow, all helped these students to succeed.

Importance of the Advisor

All instructors believed that the advisor was very valuable to the students' general experience. In particular, she was essential for making the connection between the students and the support services that students needed.

The following instructor indicates the great value of the advisor to the students: "I know that when they had questions, they could go and when I was working with them in the Learning Support Center, if they brought a question to me that I couldn't answer, they said, 'Oh, the advisor will handle it.' I know that that *support network* was vital because *they never ran into a wall* that they couldn't break through with some help. I can only imagine how helpful that was."

Another instructor thought that it was beneficial for students to have "someone to talk to." From the next instructor's perspective, the advisor was "the *conduit between the student and the support services* available to them." "She is very dedicated to make sure students, if they are having trouble, that they do get attention and receive help when they need it. She kind of gives them that motivational push to go and *get help*."

Importance of Learning Support Center

When asked "How did student support services contribute to the success of the students in the cohort?" instructors talked mostly about the Learning Support Center. One instructor said, "The one thing I can speak on probably most effectively is the *Learning Support Center* that helps with math, writing and reading. I know that they utilized it all the time. The Center was really, really useful." Another instructor added: "I've always

been a real big proponent of those types of services. It is not teaching that you do. It is may be talking about ideas and waiting for that light bulb to go on.” The following instructor thought that the college provided good student support through the Learning Support Center. “The student support was available, basically, the English and math help. Where I helped the students more, was in the Learning Support Center. And that is a part of student services. It was also nice that they could go talk to a counselor about the different classes. I always tell students to go to the counselor before they do anything.”

Having the *instructors provide additional help in the Learning Support Center* was also a good practice of the college: “I think that really helped them. I would have to say that the faculty and staff paid attention to their needs because these people kind of stood out a little bit because they weren’t from this kind of social group.”

Importance of Engagement

In order to determine whether the instructors felt that they engaged the students in the college, they were asked the following question: “Do you feel that you bonded with any of the students in particular? Please tell me about that experience.” The first story tells us about the *reciprocal nature of engagement*: “Tara*, I feel like I bonded with her quite a bit. My very first semester here, I was working in the Learning Support Center. She and her group mate Sara* were taking their first English Composition course. They would come in every once in a while, even when their instructor wasn’t there. That is when we started talking and I feel like that is where the relationship started. Through those discussions and through our approach to things, and with Tara* leading the way, they all signed up for my English Composition course during the summer... I applied for a full time teaching position at the college and I had a teaching demonstration. Tara* and

Sara* were two students that came to the actual teaching demonstration... My demonstration was a rhetorical analysis activity using the Snuggie infomercial. Later in the semester, I was working at the Learning Support Center and Tara* and Sara* came in after they had passed their English Composition course. They brought me a gift. It was a Snuggie... So it just kind of all came full circle.”

Patience and care are the main messages conveyed in the following response from a math instructor. “Yes, I bonded, especially with that one student I talked about who has dyscalculia. She still e-mails me once in a while. I have other students that e-mail me too. *I felt like more of a friend sometimes*. For example, this one student, she cried on my shoulder a few times because she just couldn’t understand it. We would take a break and then start back up. It took a lot of patience on my account too.”

Being a good listener, another instructor also engaged with the students significantly. He saw they needed *extra attention* to help them adjust to the higher education environment. “There were one or two students who shared with me more than the other students. They were explaining how it had been so many years since they were in school and how they were trying to readjust to everything in school. I would call it a *culture shock*. They hadn’t been in a classroom since 20 to 30 years ago when they were in high school and even high school is much different now than it was then.”

Because of the *personal relationships* with instructors, the students felt that their instructors really wanted them to succeed. *Through their personal relationships the instructors also helped the students to establish a stronger connection to the college.*

Not only did the students benefit from these personal relationships, but their instructors did as well. One of the instructors shared the following story: “It is something

that was very unique to that semester and that time when the group was around. It showed me that I was heading down the right path. I wanted to teach. I wanted to be in the classroom. *I wanted to be at a community college with these non-traditional students. I wanted to experience this motivation and this desire that might not be there for a traditional student* that is just going because they feel like they have to. Or they are just going because they got a scholarship and what else are they going to do or they had to get out of their parents' house or whatever else.”

It is easy to notice that when answering the question “What helped this particular group of students to succeed?” all study participants had a lot in common. They all mentioned the importance of understanding instructors, the decisive role of the excellent advisor assigned to this particular group, the significant role of fellow students, and the vital importance of personal relationships between students and their advisor, students and their instructors, students and their cohort mates. They all agreed about the importance of student support services (especially, the Learning Support Center), the necessity to encourage non-traditional students, to give them individual attention, to help them develop better study skills, and to foster their personal development. They all talked about the necessity to make adjustments because these students were non-traditional in order to help them overcome barriers to their success and cope with what one of their instructors referred to as “culture shock.” All participants noted the students’ persistence and determination, as well as the team spirit and mutual assistance that helped the group to succeed as a whole.

Conclusion

It should be said that the interviews revealed what helped these students to succeed. These interviews also contain a lot of valuable comments that can be taken into account while developing classes and support services for non-traditional students in other community colleges. These interviews demonstrate the incredible transformative power of education, even in situations when there is little hope for success and development. These students succeeded against all odds. Their success story is enlightening and encouraging. If there is support of highly qualified professionals, then everyone can learn. If there is a strong desire and determination to succeed, then everything is possible. Education really can change people's lives.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter covers conclusions drawn from the data, suggestions for future research and personal reflections on the study. The findings of this study are timely and important since community colleges continue to have individuals, who have lost their factory jobs, walk through their doors. Due to large numbers of manufacturing jobs being transferred abroad, many factory employees are seeking educational opportunities at community colleges so they would be able to compete in the changing work environment of the 21st century.

Community college students are more likely than those at universities to have completion risk factors. Approximately 80 percent of community college students can be described as disadvantaged. Nationally, about 25 percent of students who begin in the fall will not return for the spring term, and close to 50 percent will not return for the subsequent fall (McClenney, 2011).

Although a considerable amount of research on non-traditional students has been conducted to identify their barriers to success, very little has been done to identify the student perspective in the complex issues of retention and completion. The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to identify the factors (personal, programmatic, institutional) that resulted in a very high completion rate among a cohort of students enrolled at a Midwestern community college after losing their factory jobs, and (2) to determine how

those factors correlate with completion factors as identified in national community college initiatives. Following are conclusions made from the data analysis.

The focus of this study was on the factors that non-traditional students identified as most important for their program completion. The researcher explored the experiences of a cohort of students who had a substantial number of barriers to college completion but successfully finished their program of study at a rural community college in the Midwest. They beat the odds and had an extraordinary degree completion rate of 84 percent. The national success rate for community college students is 28 percent (ACT, 2010).

Overcoming Barriers to Success

The members of this cohort faced many barriers that other non-traditional students have to overcome in any other community college. These barriers were: lack of academic preparedness, advanced age, lack of technology skills, long time away from school, and lack of basic study skills.

Having *limited computer skills* was a big challenge. According to one instructor, “The ability to surf the internet, use word processors and spreadsheet programs, or presentation programs was just not there. They might have felt like outcasts.” The college’s introductory-level computer class assumes the student is coming in with basic computer knowledge. The college does not have an introductory course that teaches the very basic computer skills. This barrier was overcome thanks to *tutors* who worked with these students individually in the *Learning Support Center*. At the same time because of their *age*, some students felt *ashamed* of the fact that they needed tutoring. In this situation their advisor, their instructors and their tutors tried to do their best in order to

assure the students that there was nothing wrong with them and with their ability to learn; there was nothing wrong with learning slowly as long as they were learning.

Because they had their tuition and books paid for, they didn't need to work a second job to pay for college, so the financial barrier to their success was not significant. The students still had to overcome transportation issues, but they worked hard to overcome them by *good planning* of their time at school as well as ride sharing.

Overcoming *fear* was a common theme. Students who spend more time with teachers are more likely to learn effectively and persist in the achievement of their educational goals (CCSSE, 2008). It took a considerable amount of effort by the advisor and the instructors to convince the students to seek help. As one of the instructors put it, "When students stay silent, that can hurt them." Another instructor noted that the students were *willing to reach out for help*.

Being former factory workers, the students frequently followed detailed instructions and did not have a chance to develop their *critical thinking skills*. As one of them put it, "Critical thinking isn't allowed in factories." But college instructors usually don't have a blueprint or a checklist for students to follow. One instructor noted, "There was almost a fear because things were too open-ended."

In situations where instructors ignored the specific learning needs of these students, members of the cohort were disappointed: "Not all instructors were excellent. With one of them, we had no clue of what to do." Another "institutional barrier" relates to assessment. A shortcoming of current developmental education assessments is that they are designed to determine a student's skill level, but these scores do little to reveal what type of help students need in order to be successful in college. Different students

with the same test scores may need very different types of services in order to be successful (Bailey, 2009). This was unconditionally true regarding this specific cohort of students. The problem was solved through the conscious efforts to *individualize* classroom assignments and tutoring sessions.

When asked how comfortable they felt at the college, the students expressed their *anxiety* at being *older* students and feeling somewhat out of place. Many of these former factory workers had problems with study skills, time management, stress management, and academic writing. They were also unfamiliar with the all of the *protocols of college life*, for example, registering for classes, using learning technologies, communicating with instructors, etc. *All* respondents mentioned their *advisor* as the main person who helped them adjust to the academic environment. Thanks to the efforts put into this project by college administrators, professors and staff, all these and many other barriers to success were effectively overcome.

The stories that the students shared during their interviews show the range of barriers they faced. These students demonstrated the inner strength necessary to face their challenges while attending college. They came to college with weak study skills, weak test-taking skills, disabilities, and out-of-date technology skills. But they overcame their barriers and completed their studies.

“Thriving students are those who are able to experience life’s transitions as opportunities that lead to significant personal growth. *Yet they rarely do so without support*. Thriving students are typically surrounded by others who are thriving, and are often embedded in a community that provides them with a sense of belonging and

competence” (Schreiner, Louis & Nelson, 2012, p. viii). As evidenced by the student interviews in this study, the students were indeed able to thrive at the college because of a very supportive environment.

Factors of Student Success

This study’s findings indicate that many factors contributed to the success of these students. The following themes are highlights of the student reflections. This study’s participants identified their *advisor* as *the most important factor* in their success. The second most important factor was their *instructors*. Their *fellow students* were identified as the next most important factor. The *Learning Support Center* was the fourth most important element of their success. There were other significant factors that contributed to these students’ success including strong personal relationships, financial support, shared learning experiences, their individual characteristics, and the small college atmosphere.

Advisor

All study participants appreciated their advisor's efforts as *the most important* factor in their success, even more important than the instructors’ role in their educational transformation. It may have something to do with the advisor's unique status. In addition to her warm and approachable personality, the advisor was perceived as more accessible, a less intimidating person who did not grade their work, did not overwhelm them with her knowledge, and did not make them "feel stupid". Her *accessibility* was a constant theme in all student responses: “Anytime we needed her, she was there”, “She was accommodating and generous with her time”, etc.

College administrators quickly realized that they should have a *single contact person* to simplify the whole process for these former factory workers. All of the study participants unanimously agreed that it was a good idea to assign one advisor to their specific group: “It was the best part of our experience because if you had to bounce around from advisor to advisor, they would not get to know you personally.” *Assigning a single advisor to this specific group was very effective.*

All of study participants praised their advisor not only as a dedicated professional but also as a *person*, a friend who helped them set their goals, plan their work, resolve their conflicts and in certain cases, helped them solve their personal problems. Each student had an *individualized education plan*. Students noted, “She knew what our goals were. She knew what we wanted to accomplish.”

The advisor was highly instrumental in providing the students with the necessary *guidance to resources* as well as being a source of *encouragement* for the students. “She helped me believe in myself. The constant encouragement helped a lot.” noted one student. Another said, “She made the difference. It was her.” It was beneficial for students to have “someone to talk to”. As one of the instructors put it, “It was nice that they could go talk to a counselor about different classes. I always tell students to go to the counselor before they do anything.”

A couple of students noted that the brown bag lunches that were developed by the advisor served more than skill building sessions, they served as *psychological support* sessions. The conversations meandered around specific topics as well as issues the students faced as they worked through their courses.

As it was already mentioned, many of these former factory workers had problems with study skills, time management, stress management, and academic writing. The advisor was “the conduit between the student and the support services available to them”, according to one of the instructors. *She was the connection*. Services were available, but she made a point of *connecting* the students to the services. This even meant sometimes walking them to the resource. She *went out of her way* to be sure they were connected.

The advisor responsible for this specific group developed good *personal relationships* with each student and succeeded in creating a certain “team spirit” that united the group and fostered collaboration and cooperation between the students. The team spirit seems to have carried over from their experience of working together in the factory. As one of the instructors put it, “The support network was vital because they never ran into a wall that they couldn’t break through with some help. I can only imagine how helpful that was.”

The feedback from the students shows the value of the *one-on-one trusting relationship* that was established with the advisor. The advisor supported the students in every way. She helped them with *motivation* and promoted *reciprocal help* within the group.

It was very important for students to gain the *information* they needed to succeed. Based on the findings of this study, the students identified the advisor as the key to unlocking the information they needed. Since the rules and requirements of the culture in academia were so different from their work experiences in a factory, the students needed awareness of these differences. These students were in touch with their advisor weekly and could thus receive weekly feedback that became essential to their completion.

Research also suggests that academic advising relationships are an excellent vehicle for equipping students with effective strategies to make it through transitions (Schreiner, Louis & Nelson, 2012). Throughout the process, the advisor kept in mind the institutional goals and the specific requirements for completion. Students were able to learn coping skills from their advisor. But the main way in which academic advising can help equip students is by building hope and *personal relationships* with students.

Instructors

The data reveal that the majority of instructors who worked with this cohort did understand the *specific learning needs* of the members of this group. They clearly saw the numerous barriers to success that these students faced and tried to find ways to help them overcome those barriers. It might have been a very delicate situation when instructors had to lead, instruct, evaluate and even occasionally reprimand people who, taking into account their age and life experience, could even have been their parents.

Instructors helped the students by understanding them as *non-traditional students*, and by trying to meet their specific needs as such. They were also sensitive to the fact that many of these students had other life commitments that competed for their time and energy. The instructors also helped to open the students' eyes to new ideas and critical thinking. It is worth noting that the instructors did not emphasize the barriers to success but concentrated on the ways to overcome those barriers. They managed to convince their students that *everyone can learn*, that their difficulties related to their age and lack of academic experience were temporary and did not have anything to do with their personal qualities.

The instructors tried to find non-offensive ways to help their students develop the necessary *study skills* and habits for college success. For example, many students commented positively about their math teacher who convinced them that it was more important in math to *understand* than to remember. This allowed the students to feel empowered to succeed despite their challenges. Also the composition program at that college focuses on *critical thinking* as part of the students' writing development.

Being *good listeners*, most instructors engaged with the students significantly. In some cases the students had not been in a classroom for 20 to 30 years. The instructors felt more like *mentors* than college professors. As much as they could, they tried to eliminate barriers between the student and the instructor and bring their relationships to a more *personal* level. New possibilities could be explored through these relationships. Instructors managed to awaken or reactivate goals that students considered unattainable. Teachers tried to challenge the students to grow. They saw beyond the factory worker status with which these students entered college. They encouraged their students to develop, they encouraged students to face their fears and overcome their barriers. In many cases, through these relationships, they were encouraged to develop their *Best Possible Self*, as suggested by Marcus and Nurius. Best possible selves are "individual's conceptions of future selves including the selves that are ideal and hoped for, as well as those possible selves that one fears or dreads" (Rossiter, 2007, p. 5). When

The students were able to develop their "Best Possible Selves" through their interactions with the advisor, their instructors and their fellow classmates. They were allowed to create new versions of themselves through their student development. Most of these students would likely never have gone to college, had it not been for their factory

closing. Consequently, they have *recreated themselves* through new professions and have grown exponentially in terms of their critical thinking skills. They have changed their perspectives permanently.

Instructors tried to meet the *individual needs* of the students. As one of the instructors gently put it, “I would have to say that the faculty and staff paid attention to their needs because these people kind of stood out a little bit... These students would learn better through a hands-on, visual approach than they would when reading the material.” This and similar comments are echoed by the students: “Teachers knew our group. They tried to give individual attention as well as teaching to different learning styles.” Literature also supports that student satisfaction is fostered by practically-oriented courses (Astin as cited in Nitecki, 2011).

Instructors made themselves *available* to the students both in class and out of class: “They listened to us”. “They were very, very flexible”. Some of the instructors also served the students as tutors in the *Learning Support Center*. This unique practice seems to have played an important part in the students’ success. The students were able to meet their instructors outside of class time, in the Learning Support Center or in their offices and get the individualized assistance they needed. Additionally, that one-on-one instruction allowed for time to *deepen the relationships* and further *engage* the students at the college. As we know from the CCSSE research, academically underprepared students take advantage of opportunities for *engagement* with instructors and counselors more than academically prepared students do. They work harder than they thought they could in order to meet an instructor’s expectations (2005). Based on the feedback from the students, this seems to have been the case for this study’s participants.

Persistence and determination in many cases may be more important for success than outstanding academic abilities. The students learned that there was nothing wrong with learning slowly as long as you learn. This approach employed by instructors helped their students to *develop confidence* and an “*I can do it!*” *mentality* that is crucial for academic success. Student persistence is a function of the quality of relationships between the student and other actors within the college and their home community, and their integration with academic norms (Schreiner, Louis & Nelson, 2012, p. xv).

Fellow Students

The study participants mentioned their group mates and other students as being extremely important to their persistence and completion. *All* of the study participants as well as their advisor agreed that it was a good idea to form their factory group into a *distinct cohort*. Students felt that they were all in the same situation, they all had similar past experiences, they faced many similar problems, etc. Although most of them positively commented on their interchanges with the young students at the college, it is obvious that they felt psychologically more comfortable in the midst of “the same folks”. The team spirit, cooperation, mutual help and understanding fostered and promoted by the advisor and the instructors contributed to this cohort’s success since they felt themselves responsible not only for their personal success but for the success of the *group as a whole*. The students said, “We all worked together”, and “We had everyone trying to help one another.”

Schreiner’s 2010 study results also demonstrated that students who were connected with others and were investing effort in the learning experience, regardless of their entry characteristics, were achieving higher grades and were experiencing more

success in college than peers of similar backgrounds (as cited in Schreiner, Louis & Nelson, 2012).

The Learning Support Center

The next most important factor that influenced their success was in the area of supplemental instruction. The students referred to their *Learning Support Center* and its staff as crucial for their academic achievements. It is worth mentioning that they were glad to see their instructors as their tutors when the instructors worked with them beyond class time within the Learning Support Center.

The following retention practices, identified by the What Works in Student Retention survey results, suggest these initiatives have a significant impact on retention: reading lab, learning assistance center, tutoring, remedial coursework, math lab, and programs for first generation students (Habley, 2011). Nearly all of these conditions were met in the college. The college does not have programs for first generation college students. However, the brown bag lunches offered by the advisor addressed some of the issues faced by many first generation college students.

Feeling welcome is important when seeking assistance. The following student comments show their sense of welcome: “The Learning Support Center was amazing and all of the faculty made us feel welcome.” And even the instructors noted, “Students were willing to move beyond the classroom and not just struggle there or wait until the next class period to ask questions... The Center was really, really useful.”

Some of the unique findings of this study include the important role personal relationships played in the success of these students, the importance of having instructors

serve in the Learning Support Center, and the fact that these students had many common classes with their cohort mates.

Personal Relationships

Personal relationships between the students, instructors, and the advisor were a *decisive factor* in these students' success in college. One can see this topic running through each of the themes that emerged as part of this study's findings. The above conclusion supports Tinto's theory of student engagement that suggests that administrators and faculty should try to foster the academic and social engagement of their students within their colleges. Tinto (1993) posits that both social and academic assimilation are integral for students to persist and this was evidenced in the students' expressing the importance of the relationships that they had with one another, with the advisor, with fellow students and with their instructors.

Data analysis revealed the crucial importance of *personal relationships* in the adult education process: the student as a person and the *advisor* as a person; the student as a person and the *instructor* as a person; and the student as a person in relation to *other students*. This is something that was known before, but what seems to be *new* is the discovery of the way the college *fostered* the development of personal relationships.

This study's findings show certain elements of the process that can help. First of all, students were assigned only one advisor. This created an atmosphere of comfort and familiarity. The advisor was able to nurture these students and their relationships with each other as well.

Second, instructors were asked to work with the students in the Learning Support Center, which gave them better opportunities to develop personal relationships with the

students, unlike in the large group setting of a regular classroom. Community colleges that require instructors to serve in their version of a “Learning Support Center” may be doing a great deal of good for student success. One-on-one attention and instruction as well as the additional time to engage with the instructors are a very efficient ways to improve student success.

Third, the students were scheduled in *common classes* and had similar schedules so they would be *together* as much as possible. That helped them develop a *team spirit* and a sense of responsibility to and for one another.

Financial Support

Another significant factor of their success was that of financial support. Due to the fact that these students had *financial support* (TRA and TAA funds) for their college education, they didn’t face the typical barrier that many community college students struggle with- how to pay for college. Due to the financial support, however, they were very tightly regulated in terms of timelines, attendance, and performance. These regulations came from both the college and the funding agency. This “double control” may have aided these students by providing the structure that they had been familiar with as part of their previous positions in factories. By giving students tighter parameters, colleges may be aiding student completion.

Shared Learning

Shared learning was also identified as an important factor to the success of this cohort. In general, many of the positive experiences that the students shared included stories that involved other students at the college. These students worked frequently in *study groups*. Students said, “You could ask anybody anything whether you knew them

or not.” “We were all there, all ages, all shapes, all colors, all there for the same reason: to learn and to encourage one another.” Comments like these testify to the feeling of *collective responsibility* that developed within this cohort that made a significant contribution to these students’ success.

Tinto’s research (1993) suggests that participation in a shared learning group enables students to develop a network of support that serves to help bond the students to the broader social communities in the college and also helps to engage them more fully in academic life.

Students felt support not only from their group members, but also from the other (traditional) students. The relationships created a broader sense of integration into the college for the non-traditional students. Chickering and Reisser noted the importance of social connectedness in their now classic book, *Education and Identity*. When students have good friends, are in relationships with others who listen to them, and feel connected to others, they are socially connected. The ability to form and maintain healthy relationships is an important element in college students’ development and growth. These cohort relationships seem to be especially important for commuting and working students. The more students are involved (both academically and socially), the more likely they are to be involved in their own learning and willing to invest the time and energy needed to learn (Chickering & Reisser, 1997). These findings are also echoed in the stories told by this study’s participants. Tinto’s (1993) findings that the degree to which students feel a sense of belonging and support within the college environment determines student success were clearly revealed in the experience of these students.

Individual Student Characteristics

Bailey et. al concluded that *individual characteristics are more strongly related to completion probabilities than institutional factors* (2004). When respondents were asked what personal characteristics of students who are more likely to graduate they saw in the members of this cohort, they cited *personal drive* and *motivation*. One instructor noted, “They didn’t give up. They went out and looked for different ways that they could understand things or talk about things.” Several instructors noticed that older students, most of the time, had a better *work ethic*. One instructor noted that the students were *willing to reach out for help*. “They embraced this as a real opportunity. They were open to the experience.” “They really were open to learning... *They all sat in the front row.*”

Small College Atmosphere

The *small college* atmosphere was also indicated as one of their success factors. The following student thinks it was particularly important. “I had seen on TV where they had these big colleges where you walk into a big lecture and the teacher walks out and says ‘This is what you do’. That was my impression of a college. But when I got here, it was like ‘If you don’t understand this, come see me’. And I thought, ‘This is great, this is exactly what I needed.’” In their 2005 study, Bailey et. al found that students enrolled in medium-size community colleges (1,001-5,000 students) are less likely to have a successful outcome than students in small colleges (less than 1,000 students). In general, graduation rates go down as the size of the school increases.

This study’s participants identified their advisor, instructors, fellow students, and the college’s Learning Support Center as the most important elements of their success.

Other significant factors that contributed to these students' success included strong personal relationships, financial support, shared learning experiences, their individual characteristics, and the small college atmosphere. In the following section the study's findings will be tied to national student success research and practice.

Correlation of Findings with National Student Success

This section is about how the study's findings correlate with nationally recognized research and best practices for community colleges. The authors of the *CCSSE Promising Practices Report* (2012) identified the following practices for community college student success: assessment and placement, academic goal setting and planning, registration before classes begin, accelerated or fast track developmental education, class attendance, alert and intervention, experiential learning beyond the classroom, tutoring and supplemental instruction, etc.

Looking at the experience of this cohort of students, we can see that nearly all of these best practices were implemented by the college. The students were each *assessed* and placed into the appropriate courses right at the beginning of their college experience. All students had their *Individualized Education Plan*, which clearly laid out their semester-by-semester requirements. They were each *registered well in advance* of the beginning of their courses. Strict *attendance requirements* held the students to a high standard of course attendance (as part of their financial funding support). Alerts and *interventions* were in place also through their funding rules. They had to check in *weekly with their advisor* to ensure they were staying on task and progressing. As part of many of their programs of study, the students were active in experiential learning *outside of the classroom*. And finally, *tutoring* and *supplemental instruction* were available to the

students through the Learning Support Center and out of class meetings with their instructors.

The students did not take a formal Student Success course, but most of the necessary skill building was done through the brown bag lunches offered by the advisor. They also did not have fast track developmental education courses at the college, but the students did not mention this as an inconvenience.

Chickering and Gamson's principles for good practice in undergraduate education have been found relevant to this study's findings. "Encourage student-faculty contact." This study's participants clearly expressed good contact with their instructors. "Encourage cooperation among students." Being members of a distinct cohort, they were encouraged to help one another stay the course to completion. "Time on task." Many of the students noted that they developed good time management skills, thanks to their advisor. "Communicate high expectations." Students in this study expressed their increased sense of competence and potential as they rose to meet the expectations of their instructors. And lastly, "Respect diverse talents and ways of learning" (Chickering & Gamson, 1993). Students in this study praised many of their instructors for providing a variety of ways to learn.

College administrators, instructors and staff put significant effort into the implementation of these national best practices that helped students to succeed.

Possible Future Research

Because the topic of student success, particularly with non-traditional students, is likely to remain in the national spotlight for community colleges, it would serve us well to continue researching factors that lead to degree or certificate completion.

All students who participated in this study were female. It would be interesting to research a group of male non-traditional students in an attempt to discover gender-specific peculiarities in regards to the factors that aided their completion. For male students interpersonal relations with their advisor and their instructors may or may not be as important as this study suggests. It is a well-known fact, for example, that men and women generally behave differently when they get lost while driving in an unfamiliar neighborhood. It may be discovered that men's information seeking behavior and their ideas about which support factors are important for success in college may be different from women's perceptions.

In a different study, a researcher may analyze the financial investment necessary to provide such individualized support that may pay off with great completion rates as in this study's case.

Many students do not seek help, feel ashamed to seek help, or wait too long to seek help. What stops them? What are the factors that may play a positive or negative role in their willingness to ask for help? It would be interesting to investigate the factors that impact willingness to seek help.

Personal Reflections on the Study

This study's findings add to the knowledge base and further enlighten institutions about the factors that non-traditional students identify as most valuable to their completion- primarily *the decisive role of interpersonal relationships* in community college success. This theme runs through the entirety of the study. The students' experiences all contain the common thread that is woven throughout their college experience- the fact that *relationships* mattered significantly.

The findings of this study can be used by *community college leaders* to develop programs and services for non-traditional students who come to college in search of hope and personal redevelopment through education and new professions. There are ways that community college leaders can build cultures in their colleges that encourage retention. As a result of this study, one can clearly see the importance of all members of the college community being acutely aware of the importance of *relationships*.

Community college leaders should encourage their employees to guide the way in innovation for their student support services. For example, *leadership skills* were necessary for the advisor as she formally and informally led this group of students on the road to success. By empowering our employees to develop their leadership skills, we can build cultures of success.

For students to thrive in higher education, they must have both skills and a sense of belonging. Taking the time to get to know each student can pay off with big dividends at the end of their college experience. By creating relationships with students that are supportive and nurturing, we can help them overcome their challenges. Being attentive to the needs of each and every student can help them feel connected and engaged. *We can* assist them on their road to completion and success. The experience of this cohort, as recounted in their stories, shows that good relationship building can be highly effective for student success.

In closing, the following excerpt from a composition paper written by a member of this cohort encapsulates the tremendous transformative power that education holds. “Going from working on an assembly line mindlessly following directions not questioning for fear of disciplinary action, to a student where one is asked to think for

themselves, question everything, dissect every idea and concept presented to them. This was a problem for most because of an invisible barrier called 'habit of mind'. Once this barrier was understood it could not control these students anymore. When these new students opened their eyes to their 'habit of mind' they went from factory worker to adult student. Once this barrier was broken a transformation took place. The butterflies spread their wings and flew to new heights. In order for these new students to be successful they must be deprogrammed, if you will, from factory worker to student starting from the first semester. If this does not happen right away the students can struggle and give up, missing out on revising their life."

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APPENDIX

A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Interview Questions (students)

Researcher: Patricia Konovalov, Ferris State University

Student Name _____

Address _____

Email Address _____

Phone Number _____

Personalized Identification Number for data protection _____

Date of Birth _____

Program Studied at Mid _____

Certificate or Degree Completed _____

Gender _____ Ethnicity _____

The following questions were asked of the students face to face during the interview.

Workforce Development and Displaced Workers

1. What was your position at the factory?
2. How long had you worked there?
3. Are you employed right now? If yes, is your ***College education essential in your new job?

Barriers to Student Success

4. Did you learn how to improve your study skills? If yes, how?
5. Did you learn skills and strategies to improve your test taking abilities? If yes, how?
6. Did you feel the classes were available at convenient times for you?
7. Did you have children or others who lived with you and depended on you for their care while you were studying? If yes, how many dependents did you have while working on your degree?

8. Did you have any bad study/school habits that you had to work on and overcome in order to succeed in college? If yes, what were they?

Characteristics of students who are likely to graduate

9. Has anyone in your family ever attended at least some college? Mother, father, brother/sister, child, spouse/partner, legal guardian, none of the above?
10. What is/was your parent/s highest education level?

Institutional Elements of Success, Retention practices and Student Success Courses

11. What are three things that the college did that made the greatest contribution to your completion?
12. Were you aware of services available to help you succeed? Ex: tutoring, fin aid, computer lab, student organizations, career counseling, academic advising, writing lab assistance.
13. Did you use any of these services? If yes, which?
14. Did there come a time when you thought you weren't going to make it? When was that? What made the difference? What helped you to continue?
15. Did there come a time when you realized you were going to make it? When was that? What made the difference?

Academic Advisors' Role in Student Success

16. Did an advisor help you set goals and create a plan to achieve them?
17. Did an advisor talk with you about your commitments outside of class and help you to figure out how to balance your responsibilities?
18. How important to your experience was it to have the advisor available to you?

Instructors' role in Student Success

19. Did you feel like your instructors wanted you to succeed?
20. Did your instructors clearly explain their expectations in the classes?

Learning Communities

21. Did you feel like you were part of a learning community? What does that mean to you?

Engagement

22. How practical do you feel your classes were?
23. Did you feel welcome at the college?
24. Did you attend the brown bag lunches? If yes, did they somehow teach you “other” lessons than those specific topics they were covering each session? If yes, please explain.

Basic Demographic Information

25. What was the highest level of education you ever expected to complete?
26. Do you have any plans to continue studying in the future?

Personal Reflections

27. What do you want others to know about this experience?
28. Has this experience impacted other parts of your personal life? If yes, how?
29. Who were you when you came into the college?
30. Are you different today than when you first came to the college?

APPENDIX

B: RESEARCH CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS

Research Consent Form

Title of the Study: Against All Odds: Perspectives on Completion from Non-traditional Students in a Rural Community College

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose and benefits of the study and how the study will be conducted.

Study Purpose, Description, Procedures and Confidentiality

The purpose of this study is to gain insights from former students (specifically cohort members from the **Group) about what they perceived were the supports that helped them complete their program of study at **ity College. For this study personal interviews will be conducted. The results of the study may be used to design better educational programs for non-traditional students.

The interviews should take no more than one and one half hours to complete. Responses will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Responses to the survey will be anonymous. The individual responses will be heard exclusively by the researcher and a transcriptionist. No mention of names will be made in the audio recording. Rather, the participants will be identified by their Personalized Identification Number (PIN). The researcher will hold all responses as confidential. The PIN record sheet will be kept in a locked location, accessible only to the researcher, and the original data sheets will be shredded.

Research Subject's Rights

The researcher has explained the study to me and answered all of my questions. I have been told about the risks or discomforts as well as possible benefits of the study. I understand what the study is about, how the study is conducted and why it is being performed.

I understand that I do not have to take part in this study and my refusal to participate or my decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights. The researcher may choose to stop my participation at any time.

In case I have any questions about this study, I have been told to contact the Principal Investigator, Patricia (Trisha) Konovalov at ***.***.****. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ferris State University. Any questions about regarding human subject rights can be answered by the IRB director at ***.***.****.

I understand my rights as a research participant and I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I have been told I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

I give permission to the researcher to access my student files for purposes of this study, with an understanding that my identity will be protected through the use of the PIN identification system.

Signature of Subject _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the known risks and benefits of the research. It is my opinion that the subject understood the explanation.

Patricia Konovalov

Date

APPENDIX

C: IRB APPROVAL

IRB approval: Memo received from IRB Chair, C. Meinholdt

To: Dr. Gunder Myran & Mrs. Patricia Konovalov
From: C. Meinholdt, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application #120504 (Title: Against All Odds: Perspectives on Completion from Non-traditional Students in a Rural Community College)
Date: July 9th, 2012

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, "Against All Odds: Perspectives on Completion from Non-traditional Students in a Rural Community College" (#120504) and determined that it is *exempt – 1A* from full committee review. This exemption has an expiration date three years from the date of this letter. As such, you may collect data according to procedures in your application until July 9th, 2015.

It is your obligation to inform the IRB of any changes in your research protocol that would substantially alter the methods and procedures reviewed and approved by the IRB in this application. Your application has been assigned a project number (#120504) which you may wish to refer to in future applications involving the same research procedure.

Finally, we wish to inform researchers that the IRB requires follow-up reports for all research protocols as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45 for using human subjects in research. The follow-up report form is available from the Ferris website: <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/administration/academicaffairs/vpoffice/hsrc>. Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let me know if I can be of future assistance.

APPENDIX

D: SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR STAFF AND FACULTY

Survey Questions (Staff and Faculty)

Researcher: Patricia Konovalov, Ferris State University

Name _____

Address _____

Email Address _____

Phone Number _____

Personalized Identification Number for data protection _____

Position held at the college _____

Gender _____

The following questions were asked of the staff and faculty during a face to face interview.

1. What barriers to student success did the members of this cohort face?
2. What characteristics of students who are more likely to graduate did you see in this cohort?
3. What, if anything, did the faculty and staff do that made the greatest contribution to their completion?
4. How important do you think it was to the students' experience to have the advisor available to them at all times?
5. What would you have done differently for this cohort of students?
6. Do you feel that you bonded with any of the students in particular? Please tell me about that experience.
7. What role did the policies, programs, and student support services of the college contribute to the success of the students in the cohort?
8. What college practices may have been barriers to their success?

APPENDIX

E: RESEARCH CONSENT FORM FOR STAFF AND FACULTY

Faculty/Staff Research Consent Form

Title of the Study: Against All Odds: Perspectives on Completion from Non-traditional Students in a Rural Community College

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose and benefits of the study and how the study will be conducted.

Study Purpose, Description, Procedures and Confidentiality

The purpose of this study is to gain insights from former students (specifically cohort members from the Dura Group) about what they perceived were the supports that helped them complete their program of study at Mid Michigan Community College (MMCC). For this study personal interviews will be conducted. The results of the study may be used to design better educational programs for non-traditional students. The purpose of this consent form involves you as faculty or staff of MMCC who worked with this cohort. You will be interviewed regarding your perceptions about the success of these students.

The interviews should take no more than one hour to complete. Responses will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Responses to the survey will be anonymous. The individual responses will be heard exclusively by the researcher and a transcriptionist. No mention of names will be made in the audio recording. Rather, the participants will be identified by their Personalized Identification Number (PIN). The researcher will hold all responses as confidential. The PIN record sheet will be kept in a locked location, accessible only to the researcher, and the original data sheets will be shredded.

Research Subject's Rights

The researcher has explained the study to me and answered all of my questions. I have been told about the risks or discomforts as well as possible benefits of the study. I understand what the study is about, how the study is conducted and why it is being performed.

I understand that I do not have to take part in this study and my refusal to participate or my decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights. The researcher may choose to stop my participation at any time.

In case I have any questions about this study, I have been told to contact the Principal Investigator, Patricia (Trisha) Konovalov at ***-***-****. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ferris State University. Any questions about regarding human subject rights can be answered by Dr. Connie Meinholdt at ***-***-****.

I understand my rights as a research participant and I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I have been told I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

Signature of Faculty or Staff

Date

Principal Investigator:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the known risks and benefits of the research. It is my opinion that the subject understood the explanation.

Patricia Konovalov

Date