

COMMUNITY COLLEGE SUPPORT STAFF: WHAT ROLE DO THEY PLAY IN
STUDENT SUCCESS?

by

Lori Michelle Gonko

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Community College Leadership

Ferris State University

May 2014

© 2014 Lori Michelle Gonko
All Rights Reserved

COMMUNITY COLLEGE SUPPORT STAFF: WHAT ROLE DO THEY PLAY IN
STUDENT SUCCESS?

by

Lori Michelle Gonko

Has been approved

May 2014

APPROVED:

Noreen Thomas, EdD, Chair

James O. Sawyer, EdD, Member

Cynthia Wilson, EdD, Member

Dissertation Committee

ACCEPTED:

Roberta Teahen, PhD, Director
Community College Leadership Program

ABSTRACT

Community colleges are currently facing a myriad of challenges that affect student achievement, including changing student demographics, evolving missions, and financial issues. In response to these challenges, community colleges are implementing large-scale change initiatives that focus on increasing student success. Shifting to an educational environment where all employees are focused on student success requires all employees to function at peak performance and understand how their role supports the students. However, support staff members are often removed from consideration when it comes to student success initiatives, and the literature reveals very little about the role that these employees play in assisting students.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore the role community college support staff play in student success initiatives from the perspectives of students, support staff, and administrators at a Midwest community college. The researcher believed that a better understanding of this issue would allow college support staff the opportunity and appropriate training to assist students in achieving their educational goals. The data was collected using surveys and interviews, and analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Results of the study indicated that support staff employees play a vital role in assisting students, and could play a more robust role in student success initiatives if colleges were willing to create a more support-staff inclusive culture on campus. One way to accomplish this is to offer support staff employees additional access to the types

of professional development opportunities that are currently offered to faculty and administrators. With training and commitment, support staff can become valuable partners in an institution's student success efforts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
 CHAPTER	
ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	1
Introduction.....	1
Challenges Facing Community Colleges.....	2
Changing Student Demographics	2
Evolving Missions	5
Financial Issues.....	6
Defining Student Success	8
Problem Statement.....	17
Purpose of the Study	20
Nature of the Study.....	21
Research Questions.....	22
Significance of the Study.....	23
Summary.....	24
TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	26
Introduction.....	26
Overview of Issues Facing Community Colleges	26
Student Success Reform Efforts	29
The Importance of the Institutional Environment.....	39
Importance of Customer Service in Higher Education.....	42
The Important Role of Support Staff.....	45
Creating a Support Staff-Inclusive Environment.....	46
Professional Development Opportunities	47
Summary.....	52
THREE: RESEARCH METHODS	53
Introduction.....	53
Rationale for Research Approach.....	54
Mixed Methods Research	55
Mixed Methods Procedure Design	56
Quantitative and Qualitative Methods	59
Context for the Study.....	62
Overview of the Research Plan.....	63
Literature Review	64
IRB Approval.....	65
Participant Selection	65
Eligibility	65
Exclusions.....	66

Population and Sample	66
Interview Selection Criteria	67
Data Collection	68
Data Collection Instruments	69
Survey Data Collection	69
Interview Data Collection	70
Data Analysis	71
Quantitative Data Analysis	71
Qualitative Data Analysis	72
Mixed Methods Data Analysis	74
Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Issues	74
Limitations and Delimitations	76
Summary	78
FOUR: FINDINGS	79
Introduction	79
Context for the Study	80
Data Collection Process	82
Medlock Community College Student Questionnaire	82
Medlock Community College Support Staff Questionnaire	83
Medlock Community College Interviews	84
Additional Midwest Community College Questionnaires	85
Data Analysis Process	86
Respondent and Participant Demographics	87
Student Questionnaire Respondent Demographics	87
Support Staff Questionnaire Respondent Demographics	88
Support Staff Interview Participant Demographics	89
Administrative Interview Demographics	89
Findings: First Research Question	89
Retention and Creating a Positive Community Atmosphere	90
Teachable Moments	93
Providing Access to Resources	94
Findings: Second Research Question	96
Support Staff Perceptions at Other Institutions	98
Institution A Findings	98
Institution B Findings	100
Institution C Findings	101
Findings: Third Research Question	102
Findings: Fourth Research Question	106
General Findings	111
First Significant Theme: Importance of all Staff Roles	112
Second Significant Theme: Perceived Marginalization of Support Staff	112
Third Significant Theme: Professional Development Needs	113
Summary	114
FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	115
Introduction	115
Interpretations of the Findings	116

First Research Question: Conclusions	116
Second Research Question: Conclusions.....	118
Third Research Question: Conclusions.....	120
Fourth Research Question: Conclusions.....	122
Recommendations for Action	125
Recommendations for Further Study	128
Conclusion	129
Personal Reflection.....	129
REFERENCES	131
APPENDICES	141
A: QUESTIONNAIRES.....	141
B: INVITATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN QUESTIONNAIRES	152
C: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTS	155
D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	160
E: INVITATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEWS	162
F: CODING SCHEMA	165
G: SUPPORT STAFF QUESTIONNAIRE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS..	167
H: MEDLOCK COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERVIEW AND QUESTIONNAIRE SPREADSHEETS, CODED BY THEME	176
I: IRB APPROVAL LETTER.....	184

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Framework of Institutional Responses Needed to Move Community Colleges Ahead.....	32
Table 2. Vanguard Learning College Professional Development Offerings	50
Table 3. Data Collection Methods Used in This Study	55
Table 4. Data Collection Methods Used in This Study: Research Question 2	80
Table 5. Support Staff Questionnaire Data Collection – Other Midwest Institutions	86
Table 6. Knowledge, Skill, and Ability Themes Derived from Employee Interviews.	102

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Medlock Support Staff Questionnaire Respondent Employee Classification...	88
Figure 2. Relationship Between Support Staff KSAs and Student Success	120

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Evidence of the great challenges that community colleges face is rich in higher education literature. Anyone picking up an article written about community colleges in the past few years will undoubtedly notice they all begin similarly, with a description of extremely difficult conditions. McClenney (2011) suggests, “Community colleges currently are experiencing perhaps the highest expectations and the greatest challenges in their history” (p. 1). Some works introduce challenges as a broad concept; others link challenges to specific issues such as funding. According to Wyner, “In the spotlight more than ever before, community colleges are increasingly being asked to do more with less...” (2012). In 2006, Locke and Guglielmino claimed that the challenges were related to the pressures of constant change occurring in higher education, stating, “Today’s colleges and universities operate in a complex environment characterized by rapid and unrelenting change” (p. 216). Six years later, the American Association of Community Colleges believes that change is not the problem, but the solution:

Amidst serious contemporary challenges, community colleges need to be redesigned for new times. What we find today are student success rates that are unacceptably low, employment preparation that is inadequately connected to job

market needs, and disconnects in transitions between high schools, community colleges, and baccalaureate institutions. (AACC, 2012)

Topics for challenges found in many articles, books, and reports include funding, higher expectations, increased governmental requirements, and most of all, change. Whether change is viewed as the problem or the solution, it is a much-discussed issue in higher education and represents a focal point for the dialogues about the challenges community colleges face.

Challenges Facing Community Colleges

Change pervades all areas of higher education, but in recent years changes in three key areas have come to the forefront: student demographics, community college mission statements, and financial issues. These issues are among the myriad that can positively or negatively affect student success. The following section will provide an overview of the current conditions existing in higher education, and how institutions are responding in order to promote a culture of student success even in the midst of challenging times.

Changing Student Demographics

Community college enrollment is increasing and diversifying as more than half of all students enrolled in undergraduate higher education are attending a community college as opposed to a four-year institution. While a diverse environment enriches the overall educational experience for students, it can have other, challenging implications as well. Diversity extends far beyond the confines of race and ethnicity, and includes age, socio-economic status, family composition, and employment status. Students today are

facing many challenges in their lives besides homework and studying, and these external challenges often negatively affect student success.

The majority of community college students no longer fit into the category of the “traditional” student, age 18-20, recently graduated from high school and planning to complete their community college program within two years (Myran, 2009). The average age of the community college student is 28 years old (AACC, 2012). Fifty-nine percent of full-time community college students are working full time, while 49% percent of part-time students are working full time (“White House Summit,” 2010). Many of these students are also raising families or caring for loved ones. Some are unemployed and facing economic challenges, some are first-generation college students, and some are struggling to learn English while they attend their courses. Mentions of the diverse array of community college students have pervaded the literature in recent years. As Cohen and Brawer indicated in 2008, “Two words sum up the students: number and variety” (p. 43). Myran (2009) noticed a similar trend: “[Students] are rich and poor, young and old, and of just about every color and background imaginable” (p. 1). In 2012, The American Association of Community Colleges labeled the community college as “The Ellis Island” of higher education. While student diversity contributes to the richness of the classroom environment and can create a more stimulating and welcoming environment for learning, it contributes to classroom challenges as well. From a faculty standpoint, it would be a much easier task to enter a classroom comprised of twenty students who have an identical knowledge base and who are ready to dive in to the material at hand. However, a diverse group of students means that students are entering the classroom from all backgrounds, at different levels of preparedness to learn, and with varying personal circumstances that

may make it difficult to focus on course work. Faculty must be prepared to reach out and teach all of these students, and be able to reap the benefits of diversity while minimizing the challenges it presents (Fine & Handelsman, 2010).

The community college serves as an access point for those who wish to pursue higher education; the minimal entrance requirements allow nearly anyone to become a college student. This *open access* or *open door function* now serves as the foundation for all other community college operations. It is more than a simple admissions policy; it is a philosophy that people from a wide variety of backgrounds can achieve success and improve their quality of life if they choose. Community colleges have “long served as the gateway to higher education and thus to the middle class” (AACC, 2012). This is why they are enrolling a high percentage of low income, economically disadvantaged, and minority students. As of 2009, 42% of students are the first generation in their family to attend college. Community colleges are enrolling 44% of black undergraduates, 51% of Hispanic undergraduates, 54% of Native American undergraduates, and 45% of Asian/Pacific Islanders. Thirteen percent of all community college students are single parents (AACC, 2012). As Shannon and Smith (2006) note, “Because so many of these students come from low-income or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, one can infer that without the open door, few would be able to attend an institution of higher education” (p. 16). Unfortunately, students from low-income or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are also more prone to dropping out. While the original intent of the open door concept may have been that anyone who has *the ability to benefit* can become a student, in reality of the open door concept allows anyone to become a student, whether or not they have the ability to benefit. According to the Achieving the Dream

network, “fewer than half of all students who enter community college with the goal of earning a certificate or degree have met their goal six years later. And those numbers are much worse for low-income students and students of color” (Achieving the Dream, 2012). These students comprise a large portion of the community college student population, and have traditionally faced the greatest barriers to achievement and success in higher education. Colleges are responding to this issue by shifting their missions to place more focus on developmental education in order to maintain the open door and foster student success (Kozeracki & Brooks, 2006).

Evolving Missions

Community colleges have been open access institutions since the 1960s, but more recent factors have caused institutions to realize that providing all people with access to education is not enough. These factors include the diversifying of the student population, the demand for a globally competitive workforce, the shift from an agricultural and industrial to a knowledge-based economy, and the federal and state demands to increase the number of graduates. The idea of the typical community college student has disappeared, and with that, the mission of community colleges has evolved as well. Community colleges are traditionally seen as institutions that prepare students to transfer to a baccalaureate program or train students to enter the workforce. Now, evolving missions have risen in importance in response to the changing nature of the student body and overall environment. Many students enter the college underprepared for college coursework, increasing the demand for developmental education programs. Continuing education programs have also increased in importance for college attendees who have short-term goals, such as retraining or retooling for the workforce.

“Community colleges are [also] facing a paradigm shift: from available to convenient, from teaching to learning, from supported to self-assisted, from insulated to community based” (Baker, 2003, p. 13). They are expected to meet the ever-changing needs of the community, foster student success, create programs that prepare graduates for the current job market, create programs that prepare graduates for successful transfer, and fulfill state and federal reporting requirements. However, even given these difficult circumstances, community colleges are the fastest growing segment of the higher education system in the United States (The White House, 2010). The open access policies and comparatively lower tuition rates make these institutions an extremely important part of all communities, serving students who may not have the opportunity, academic preparation, or financial means to attend a four-year school (West, Shulock, & Moore, 2012). While community colleges are committed to serving all students and fulfilling all missions, education is facing more and more budget cuts each year and institutions are trying to achieve all missions and goals with less funding (Dickeson, 2010).

Financial Issues

Similar to student body demographics and institutional missions, community colleges are also experiencing great changes related to the financial resources required to support their endeavors. Several issues have impacted funding for public institutions, including the 2008-2009 recession, increased competition for funds in the public sector, increased government regulations and unfunded mandates, increased competition for students, increased competition for faculty and staff, and the rising costs of goods, services, and technology (Barr and McClelland, 2011). All of these issues have contributed to revenue and expenditure fluctuations, prompting concern about the stability and future of community college funding.

“The 2008-2009 recession had a profound effect on American higher education” (Barr & McClennan, 2011, p. 2). During the 2009 fiscal year, direct state support to the public institutions decreased, as did the number of scholarships and state grants awarded to individual students. Further reductions have occurred since. While a reduction in state support for higher education would be an issue any time that it occurred, institutions are currently “overwhelmed by competing demands, internal and external, that threaten the capacity to meet ever increasing expectations” (Dickeson, 2010, p. 1). More than ever, community colleges are in need of financial resources to allow them to meet all demands, but appropriations are only decreasing. The decrease in state support is not only linked to the 2008-2009 recession, but also to the increased competition for funds occurring in the public sector. State governments are funding a greater number of programs with tax support: state health care programs have expanded as a result of the aging population; prison and public safety programs have grown because of the increase in criminal behavior; and recreational land use has increased, thus requiring more funds to assure the safety of people using the lands (Barr & McClellan, 2011). All of these competing needs equal less available funding for education, which affects higher education institutions’ operating budgets, available funds to hire more faculty or increase support services, and budgets for special projects, such as building renovations.

Simultaneously, higher education has experienced an enormous growth in the number of regulations and mandates from the state and federal governments, including campus security and safety programs, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), discrimination laws, and research regulations. While all of these regulations are extremely important to protect and assist faculty, staff, and students, implementation

and maintenance come at a cost that is rarely funded by the governing agency that created the requirements. Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, says it is unlikely that the funds community colleges have lost through state-budget cuts will be restored. "The real fundamental question," he says, "is, how can we serve more students at a lower cost with higher levels of success? (Quoted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2012)

A common theme runs through the variety of challenges currently facing community colleges. All issues, whether stemming from changing student demographics, pressures associated with evolving missions, or financial reductions will ultimately affect student success. The demand for a globally competitive workforce and the shift to a knowledge-based economy suggest that a college education is becoming increasingly important in the quest for a career and economic success (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005 and Moore, 2009). College enrollment has spiked as a result and more students are seeking the skills to be competitive in the work force. Unfortunately, many of these students face challenges besides education, including work, family, and economic hardships, and many enter without sufficient preparation. The changing student demographic has affected community college missions as the need for developmental education and continuing education courses increases. Enrollment increases and evolving missions, coupled with an increase in demands from the federal and state governments, have put pressure on college budgets. All of these factors are links in the chain that comprises student success.

Defining Student Success

For the past decade, most of the research and work on higher education policies has focused on access, particularly on ensuring that previously underrepresented populations receive equal opportunities to attend postsecondary institutions with the help

of state aid and institutional support. “Now, in the face of dwindling public resources, the policy debate has increasingly shifted from ‘access’ to ‘success’ issues, such as retention and evidence of learning outcomes— in other words, to what happens to students after they enter college” (American Federation of Teachers, 2011, p. 3). Many schools, organizations, and administrators are in search of one proven formula that will enable all students to achieve their educational aspirations and succeed, yet there is debate as to what student success looks like. Perhaps the lack of one solid definition of student success occurs because there are many different (but equally important) factors that constitute student success.

Some researchers, such as Vincent Tinto, perceive student retention rates as indicators that measure the quality of student success. The logical argument is that without retention from semester to semester, students would never achieve a degree or certificate. Tinto promotes a model of student retention that is institutionally oriented and seeks to explain the “processes of interaction between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college” that lead to student persistence or attrition (Tinto, 1975, p. 94). His model is longitudinal, beginning with a student’s pre-entry attributes, or their personal background and characteristics that comprise his or her identity upon entry. These attributes include race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, emotional preparedness, current skills and abilities, and prior schooling experiences. All of those characteristics combine and influence the student’s goals and motivation before starting his or her academic program. Once students enroll and begin their coursework, they begin to have “institutional experiences,” which Tinto divides into academic experiences and social experiences. While pre-entry attributes and goals/motivation certainly

influence student persistence, the main thrust of Tinto's model is that the student's experiences and integration into the academic and social systems of the college have the greatest impact. The higher the degree of integration, the more likely students are to persist. To Tinto, student success is predicated upon persistence and retention.

In 1993, Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser posited the notion that student success is equivalent to the development that occurs during a student's college years. Their theory of student development strongly argues that the overall purpose of higher education institutions is to *intentionally* enable student development and create "educationally powerful environments" that will allow this to occur (1993, p. 454). Chickering and Reisser's theory describes seven specific areas of development, which are labeled "vectors." The vectors function as building blocks of a student's identity, including: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity.

Under Chickering and Reisser's theory, "human development should be the organizing purpose for higher education" (1993, p. 265), and higher education institutions should intentionally enable human development by creating these educationally powerful environments (1993, p. 454). In an educationally powerful environment, students would enjoy a maximum amount of human interaction; faculty would employ active learning strategies; curricula would incorporate both academic and experiential learning, and the institution would set high expectations for all students. Chickering believes that this type of environment already occurs in traditional residential colleges, but all schools, including community colleges, must create this type of environment. Chickering's notion

is a far cry from the community college sector of higher education as it exists today, which has become market-driven, pushed by local and regional needs. The focus in recent years has shifted to teaching students strictly subject knowledge and job skills in order to label them as “completers” with the potential to be immediately employable. As O’Banion (2012) explains, “The Student Success Agenda in the last five years has morphed into the Completion Agenda championed by legislators, foundations, policy analysts, business leaders, and educators” (p. 5). U.S. President Barack Obama established this agenda in 2009 as the American Graduation Initiative, with the goal of doubling the number of students who complete a certificate or associate degree by 2020 (The White House, 2009). Since that time, the initiative has become known as the Completion Agenda within higher education.

Completion has become the latest definition of student success in higher education, following Obama’s 2009 speech in which he pointed out that the United States has been outpaced in the higher education arena, with less than half of U.S. citizens possessing a higher education credential (The White House, 2009). This speech juxtaposed the reduction in college completers with the fact that, in today’s world, a college degree is “a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy.” Out of the 30 fastest-growing jobs in the U.S., over half require a college education. In order to increase the number of U.S. citizens who meet these job requirements, Obama challenged all Americans to commit to at least one year of higher education and promoted the goal that the United States must once again become the highest granter of college degrees by 2020 (The White House, 2009).

In the years following Obama's 2009 speech, a number of foundations and associations have focused their funding efforts on the Completion Agenda, such as the Lumina Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Complete College America. "Except for the Access Agenda, never in the history of the community college have so many stakeholders signed on to such an agenda as doubling the number of completers in the coming decade. And, never in the history of the community college have such large amounts of funding been provided by foundations to support such a focused initiative" (O'Banion, 2012, p. 6). The completion agenda is tightly linked to success in the global economy, and one of the ways in which community colleges have responded to the agenda is by increasing the number of occupational programs that are aimed at securing employment for students immediately upon graduation. These programs are often accelerated so that students spend a minimal number of semesters in the classroom, strictly learning the necessary skills to obtain entry-level employment in a given field. Community colleges have also engaged in initiatives such as reverse transfer agreements under which students who transferred to a four-year institution without earning an associate's degree can transfer credits back to the community college and receive a credential. These efforts affirm the importance that the nation's leaders have placed on increasing the number of Americans with a postsecondary degree in the coming decade.

Each of these perspectives on student success (access, retention, development, and completion) has been met with ongoing debate, resulting in a lack of a shared definition of student success across higher education. During the days when the concept of access ruled, community colleges were specifically applauded for their role as

institutions for all students, especially low-income and minority students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to pursue a college degree. This is certainly something that should be celebrated, but over time, scholars - such as Tinto and Chickering - began to realize that access was not enough to constitute student success. Many low-income and minority students were (and still are) entering college unprepared for college coursework and thus not be able to complete degrees. This is resulting in high dropout rates and possibly high levels of debt accrual for students who pay for classes in which they are unable to succeed. Sensing that focusing on open access was resulting in a revolving door, other student success agendas began to take shape. As previously noted, Tinto argues strongly for retention and persistence as defining factors of success, and yet the counterargument is that “retention might be more appropriate as a success measure for prisons rather than higher education institutions, as it reflects merely the ability to hold someone in a place” (O’Banion, 2012, p. 4). Chickering and Reisser write that student development is the hallmark of success, but others argue that personal development does not assist a student as much as completion of a credential. Now, at a time when policymakers and higher education leaders are focusing on the Completion Agenda, there is debate as to what constitutes a “completer.” If success is measured by completion of a degree or certificate, students who attend community college to update skills with one or two classes, or those who attend with the goal of transferring credits elsewhere do not count as “successes.”

In an example of putting the cart before the horse, many postsecondary institutions are attempting to solve a problem (increasing student success) that has yet to be clearly defined, or at the very least is a constantly evolving concept. The definition of

student success and ways to support it have become yet another issue in the postsecondary realm that is characterized by unrelenting change, much like student demographics, missions, and financial issues. In fact, student demographics, missions, and financial issues are links in the chain that comprises student success. In order to ensure that the chain remains intact, even in the midst of challenging times, institutions are looking at new or different educational models from which to frame their college initiatives. As McClenney (2012) notes, “There is broad consensus that U.S. higher education needs to do better,” but institutions are becoming overwhelmed by changes, challenges, and expectations, making it difficult to know where to start. This has prompted notable figures such as McClenney and O’Banion to elevate discussions of the need for change to a higher level. Rather than continue to simply discuss the need for change and definitions of issues, McClenney and O’Banion’s work, along with many others, centers on finding solutions through new frameworks that can be implemented at any institution. As Chapter 2 will explain in more detail, a common thread can be found in many student success frameworks; each framework highlights the importance of a community college’s human resources in finding and implementing solutions to community college issues. In order to address the issues of student success, many groups within the institution must be actively involved.

Five models have emerged in the last two decades, and some fairly recently, that demonstrate how colleges use human resources. The Aspen Institute, an educational and policy studies organization, claims that community college faculty play the most important role in helping their respective institutions achieve excellence. Wyner points out that “Anyone who has worked on a college campus knows why professors need to be

engaged if excellence is to be achieved. In both the two- and four-year sectors, teachers are at the center of what colleges do” (2012, p. 16). While this statement is accurate in the sense that faculty are the center of higher education, the Aspen Institute does not overtly recognize in their literature any other employee sectors as playing a role in student success. The 21st Century Commission of American Association of Community Colleges, in their 3Rs plan, calls upon another group within the institution to lead the college into the future: the leadership. The Commission suggests, “Change cannot be achieved without committed and courageous leaders. While many things need to happen to accomplish institutional transformation, none of them will happen without leadership” (AACC, 2012). In comparison, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) oversees the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, which is based on a set of criteria guiding higher education institutions in the key areas of student learning and processes, customers, workforce, leadership/governance, and finance/markets. According to Badri et al. (2005), “the criteria argue strongly for customer-driven organizations and high levels of employee involvement.” While leadership plays a large role in the Baldrige program, its customer-driven focus and emphasis on employee involvement set this framework apart from the Aspen and 21st Century 3Rs models. Lastly, Terry O’Banion proposes two additional approaches to student success, the Learning College model and Student Success Pathway (SSP) model. The Learning College model is based on the idea that education should focus on the learner rather than on the instructor or the institution by providing “educational experiences for learners any way, any place, any time” (O’Banion, 1997, p. 47). O’Banion describes this large-scale change to a learning paradigm as requiring involvement from all college employees, a concept that is repeated

in the SSP model. From the community college perspective, the SSP provides a framework for institutional planning. It is a roadmap of all policies, programs, practices, and courses that affect students from entrance to graduation. O'Banion (2013) explains that the SSP "reflects what colleges actually do to help students navigate the curriculum to successful completion, and what colleges actually do is the essence of the college's strategic and long-range plans" (p. 12). In both the Learning College and SSP models, O'Banion encourages collaboration among faculty, administrators, support staff, and trustees to refine and enhance student success initiatives.

The five frameworks previously described share many components. Each model begins with an assessment of current issues facing community colleges that negatively affect student success, and recommend substantial changes to traditional institutional culture and practices as a means of overcoming those issues. Each model describes ways in which various groups of college employees can alter current processes and classroom norms to ensure student success in today's society. The focus on administration and faculty as change proponents appears prevalent in the Aspen model and the 21st Century Commission 3 Rs model. Administrators and faculty will certainly play a large role in bringing about a new institutional culture, but all employees contribute to student success, not just faculty and administrators. The Baldrige program emphasizes leadership but also customer service, which is provided by all employees. O'Banion's Learning College and SSP models overtly encourage collaboration among all institutional stakeholders in working towards widespread student success. He notes that initiatives need to be "launched college wide by a critical mass of college faculty and staff" (2013,

p. 16). As O'Banion recognizes, making a significant change will take commitment from all college employees.

Problem Statement

Shifting institutional culture to focus on student success is often considered the realm and responsibility of the upper-level administration, with the expectation that any decisions and new initiatives will reach the students by trickling down through the faculty and into the classroom. In the article "Leading Organizational Culture: Issues of Power and Equity," Lumby (2012) writes that educational leaders must be aware of the existing organizational culture and actively work to shape that culture, while the staff at educational institutions create "subcultures" within the organization (emphasis added). The notion of subcultures suggests that the staff is separate from the overall culture of the organization, whether by choice or by marginalization from the dominant culture driven by administration and faculty. Similarly, Kotter (1995) created a popular eight-step change model for enacting organizational change, with Step Two instructing leaders to "create a guiding coalition." This coalition should include people who exert position power, expertise, leadership, and credibility – namely, those in management positions, with the exclusion of the less powerful staff. Unfortunately, it is sometimes forgotten that community college employees from all areas of the institution interact with the student population, not just faculty and administrators, and should be intimately involved in creating a culture focused on student success.

When potential students initially decide they want to pursue their education at a community college, the first people they encounter on campus are most often the non-teaching support staff, also referred to as classified staff at some institutions. This group

includes those who work within academic department offices, the enrollment office, financial aid, advising, counseling, registration, the library, etc. These frontline/support staff members are instrumental in creating a student's initial impression of the institution. Interaction with frontline/support staff does not stop once a student is enrolled. It continues throughout a student's semesters, indicating that these staff members have a role to play in student retention as well.

All college employees share the responsibility for student recruitment, retention, and ultimate success. In his work describing the Learning College concept, O'Banion refers to all employees working within an institution as "learning facilitators." He does not believe that the title should be exclusive to faculty and administrators. Although faculty, administrators, and support staff all have different roles within the college, as learning facilitators these groups have one key element in common – learning facilitators define their roles and their work in response to the needs of the learners (O'Banion, 2006). Following this model, every staff member is inextricably linked to the students, and should consider how their work affects a student's ability to learn, as well as how they can better meet the needs of the student population by creating an environment that supports student success.

If the goal is to create an environment conducive to student success, that environment must be in place from the moment students enter the doors and continue throughout all of their day-to-day interactions on campus. This requires commitment and involvement from all staff members. For many institutions, this is not current practice and will require an organizational change. As O'Banion indicates, involving all stakeholders in organizational change is paramount: "The new 'science' of management

and leadership that prescribes flattened organizations, open communication, and empowered participation makes a strong case for involving all stakeholders in major reform efforts” (1997, p. 237). At community colleges, stakeholders can include faculty, administration, staff, students, trustees, and community members. All of these groups work together to create an overall educational experience for students.

Shifting to an educational environment where every department and employee focuses on student success requires all employees to function at peak performance and understand how their role supports student success. Faculty and administration are prepared for this through professional development focused on tactics and strategies for working with and for students. These professional development opportunities are often a requirement of the onboarding process for new faculty and administrators in the form of a faculty academy or leadership training seminars. The remaining employee sector – support staff – appears to be left behind. At many institutions, onboarding these *forgotten employees* consists of filling out personnel paperwork and providing them with a computer, a workstation, and an ID badge. The difference in employee preparation sets a precedent for the marginalization of the support staff, excluding them from participation in important college initiatives such as organizational or cultural shifts. Without proper professional development and training opportunities, support staff cannot be fully engaged in creating an environment that supports student success.

It is apparent then that support staff have an impact on student success. They seldom, however, participate in institutional initiatives focused on student success nor is their impact included in the analysis of student success data. Including support staff in the information used to improve student success is, therefore, important.

Purpose of the Study

As the forthcoming literature review will reveal, a plethora of information exists on engaging in cultural shifts within higher education and best practices/professional development for faculty and administrators who hope to achieve a shift that will positively affect student success. However, all staff members are equally responsible for engaging in these changes. Little information exists that considers the role that frontline and support staff play in encouraging student success and creating the type of educationally powerful environments touted by Chickering, Reisser, O'Banion, and McClenney. As such, the primary concerns of this study are to explore perceptions of community college support staff roles in student success initiatives from the student, support staff, and administrative perspectives; and to address the need for professional development programs for frontline and support staff at community colleges. Frontline and support staff included in this study are: (1) Administrative assistants and secretaries; (2) student services staff, including those in admissions/enrollment, advising/counseling, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran's services, and job placement; (3) instructional support, such as program and lab assistants; (4) facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees; (5) campus security; (6) dining service; (7) technical support staff, such as media services and IT; and (8) "behind the scenes" employees, such as business services, mailroom, and copying/printing. The study also seeks to identify the skills required of frontline staff and support staff in order for them to participate in creating an institutional environment focused on student success. For the purposes of this study, professional development programs will be defined as the continuous process of acquiring knowledge and skills that relate to one's profession or work environment.

Nature of the Study

Based on a review of research methods, the researcher determined that a concurrent mixed methods approach is the most appropriate for this study. A mixed methods study allows the researcher to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. As Creswell noted, mixed method research “is more than simply collecting and analyzing both kinds of data; it also involves the use of both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of a study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research” (2008, pg. 4). In a concurrent mixed methods study, the researcher seeks to incorporate the findings from one method with the findings from a second method in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of the research problem. This study utilized a quantitative approach in order to determine support staff perceptions of the correlation between student success and support staff interaction at the primary research institution, Medlock Community College (pseudonym). Those findings were combined with the qualitative portion of the study, in which the researcher explored the concepts in detail using focus group and one-on-one interviews with community college support staff and administrators from the same institution. A second quantitative aspect occurred within the primary institution, in which the researcher conducted a survey of current students so that three different levels of perspectives (student, support staff, and administration) could be included in the in-depth, single institution analysis. The researcher anticipated that drawing on multiple forms of data with the combined use of qualitative and quantitative approaches within one institution would lead to an expanded understanding of support staff and their role in student success. The quantitative support staff survey was repeated at three other Midwest community colleges. These findings were compared to those from Medlock Community College. By doing so, the researcher

hoped to determine whether the identified support staff perceptions of their role in student success is unique to the primary institution or prevalent in other institutions as well.

Research Questions

The researcher is interested in discovering the perception that support staff have of their roles in student success and maximizing support staff performance to cultivate an ideal environment for student success. The following questions were examined through a mixed methods research study:

1. Is there a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction?
2. Do support staff employees perceive that they have a role in supporting student success? If they do, what is that perception, and how does it compare to support staff perceptions at other institutions?
3. What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success?
4. What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required support staff skills?

As previously described, the concept of student success in higher education is continuously evolving. For the purposes of this study, student success will be defined as students being retained and comfortable in the community college environment.

Academic success certainly plays a large role in student retention, but the primary focus of this study is on the non-academic elements of success.

Significance of the Study

Human resources are an important aspect of organizational structure, and a shift to a student-centered institution cannot occur without the participation of all employee groups. Institutions need to encourage support staff to participate in institutional efforts affecting student success and should develop professional development programs specifically for this employee group. Without appropriate professional development opportunities, this large employee sector will continue to remain on the margins of the institution; a position that provides no incentive or opportunity to participate in college-wide initiatives. Community colleges have clearly recognized the importance of select sections of their human resources when it comes to engaging in important school reform specifically focused on student success. However, a lack of published research exists that identifies the importance of support staff professional development opportunities for these employees to become student-centered. This study will add to the body of knowledge on support staff in community colleges, specifically in the area of professional development/training programs aimed at this population. In addition, this study has the potential to contribute to knowledge of cultural shifts in community colleges. Many community colleges are actively working towards becoming student-centered institutions, which could require a cultural shift. Faculty and administrators are often tasked with shifting or shaping organizational culture while support staff employees are left out of the process. This study will focus on this group that plays an important role but is traditionally removed from consideration.

Summary

Community colleges are currently facing a myriad of challenges that affect student success, including changing student demographics, evolving missions, and financial issues. In order to continue promoting a positive culture of student success in the midst of challenging times, institutions are beginning to reexamine the traditional educational models that have been followed for decades and are turning to frameworks that promote new or different ideas of education. These frameworks aim to bring about significant changes within community colleges by setting forth specific best practices for institutions to follow. There are several frameworks that have been popularized in recent years (the Aspen Institute, the 21st Century Commission on Community Colleges, the Learning College, etc.), and while they vary in ideas and promoted best practices, each framework discusses the importance of a community college's human resources in finding and implementing solutions to issues in order to increase student success. However, it is interesting to note that the majority of this literature focuses on the importance of administration and faculty in implementing these new practices and fails to mention the role that community college support staff play in encouraging student success.

In light of this gap in the literature, the primary goals of this study are discovering the perception that support staff have of their roles in student success, and maximizing support staff performance to cultivate an ideal environment for student success. The researcher accomplished this with a mixed methods study that drew upon qualitative and

quantitative data, with the intention that this approach will lead to an expanded understanding of support staff and their role in student success.

CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review will investigate the current scholarly body of knowledge surrounding the problem and the research questions of this study. The review consists of a comprehensive examination of literature on student success-focused reform efforts (page 28), the importance of the institutional environment (page 37), customer service in higher education (page 40), the role of support staff (page 43), creating a support-staff inclusive environment (page 44), and professional development programs for community college staff (page 46).

Overview of Issues Facing Community Colleges

Many internal and external forces are creating challenges for America's community colleges, challenges that have the potential to negatively impact student success. Community colleges have traditionally been open access institutions that accept students at varying levels of preparedness, but student enrollment today encompasses even more variables. Community colleges are enrolling a high percentage of low income, economically disadvantaged, and minority students, many of whom enter with insufficient preparation to be successful in the classroom (AACC, 2012). This enrollment trend is occurring in response to the job market, which requires higher-level education and more specialized training than in years past, and at the urging of the government with

President Obama's goal to lead the world in college graduate numbers by 2020. As the Center for Community College Student Engagement notes, there is also an urgency to increase the number of college graduates in order to sustain both local and national economies (CCSSE, 2012). Because of these factors, students who would not have previously considered college are seeking the skills to be competitive in the job force and so the idea of the *traditional* student has changed. However, 60% of students entering college are not prepared for college coursework and are enrolling in remedial classes of some type (Moore, 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2008; Hughes & Clayton, 2011). Colleges are responding to this need by shifting their focus to developmental education efforts and helping students from all backgrounds succeed.

Community colleges are traditionally viewed as institutions that prepare students either to transfer to a baccalaureate program or train students to enter the workforce. Today continuing education programs have also increased in importance for college attendees who have short-term goals, such as retraining or retooling for the workforce, as opposed to degree or certificate goals. Meanwhile, colleges are still working to help students who wish to transfer and those who wish to earn an associate degree and immediately enter the workforce. The very nature of multiple missions suggests that colleges are spreading themselves thin, and while community colleges are committed to serving all students and fulfilling all missions, education is facing more and more budget cuts each year and institutions are trying to achieve all missions and goals with less funding (Dickeson, 2010; Barr & McClennan, 2011). Simultaneously, the numbers of students entering colleges and actually achieving a credential are decreasing. According to the Achieving the Dream network, "fewer than half of all students who enter

community college with the goal of earning a certificate or degree have met their goal six years later. And those numbers are much worse for low-income students and students of color” (ATD, 2012). Synthesizing all of this information reveals a large challenge facing community colleges today: there is an ever-growing population of students entering the college with a wider variety of needs than ever, and yet completion rates are extremely low and budgets are being reduced at the federal, state, and local levels. The reduction in funding, coupled with the increase in initiatives and the need to increase student completion rates suggests that colleges must work strategically to ensure that precious resources (personnel, time, and money) are being spent on highly effective practices that increase success and completion for all students (CCSSE, 2012).

Community colleges are focused on increasing success for all students, but what constitutes *success* in higher education today? For the past decade, most of the research and work on higher education policies has focused on access, particularly on ensuring that previously underrepresented populations receive equal opportunities to attend postsecondary institutions with the help of state aid and institutional support. According to the American Federation of Teachers (2011), “Now, in the face of dwindling public resources, the policy debate has increasingly shifted from “access” to “success” issues, such as retention and evidence of learning outcomes—in other words, to what happens to students after they enter college” (p. 3). Given the extremely low numbers of students entering colleges and actually earning a credential, access alone is clearly no longer enough.

According to the federal Committee on Measures of Student Success (2011), “increasing the number of college graduates in the United States is critical to economic

growth and global competitiveness.” As such, student progression and completion has become the latest definition of student success in higher education, following President Obama’s 2009 speech in which he pointed out that the United States has been outpaced in the higher education arena, with less than half of U.S. citizens possessing a postsecondary credential (The White House, 2009). This speech juxtaposed the reduction in college completers with the fact that, in today’s world, a postsecondary credential is “a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy.” Out of the 30 fastest-growing jobs in the U.S., over half require a college education (The White House, 2009). President Obama challenged all Americans to commit to at least one year of higher education and promoted the goal that the United States must once again become the highest granter of college certificates and degrees by 2020 (The White House, 2009). In attempting to meet this goal, community colleges are recognizing that the status quo will no longer suffice. Large-scale changes must occur in order to improve student success and completion.

Student Success Reform Efforts

In recent years, several key issues have come to the forefront in higher education: changing student demographics, the evolving community college mission, and financial issues. These issues are among the myriad that can negatively affect student success and completion rates. In response to these issues, institutions are beginning to reexamine the traditional education models that have been followed for decades. As the American Association of Community Colleges states, “No matter how significant the contributions of community colleges in the past, the ground beneath their feet has shifted so dramatically in recent years that they need to rethink their role and mission” (2012). In

order to accomplish the monumental task of overhauling past practices, institutions are turning to frameworks that promote new or different ideas of education and student success.

The Aspen Institute, an educational and policy studies organization, provides one framework for excellence in community colleges. The Institute's mission is "to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues," which they strive towards by offering seminars, policy programs, and events. They also provide young leader fellowships so that leaders from around the world can come together and hone their leadership skills. The Institute is involved in a variety of initiatives that span the business, health, and education worlds, but they also have a program specifically targeted towards higher education. Named the College Excellence Program, this initiative "aims to identify and replicate campus-wide practices that significantly improve college student outcomes" (Aspen Institute, 2011). To encourage more institutions to strive towards excellence, in 2011 the Institute introduced the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, created as a means of recognizing outstanding efforts of community colleges in the areas of academic and workforce education and student success. In the Aspen Prize, winning colleges "have achieved high levels of success for their students. They partner with employers to train students for internships, and then employment after graduation. They assess learning, improving instruction for students who have not always excelled educationally. And, they graduate students, delivering the quality credentials students will need to succeed in life, career, and continuing higher education" (Aspen Institute, 2011, p. 2).

The Aspen Institute defines community college excellence as providing all students access to high quality, continuously improving education and giving them the skills needed to be successful in life. Furthermore, they suggest that education at an excellent school should motivate students to succeed and inspire them to excel. This is measured by four criteria: completion outcomes (awarding associate's degrees, certificates, or facilitating student transfer), learning outcomes (high levels of student learning within programs), labor market outcomes (aligning institutional policies with the local labor market, resulting in high employment rates upon graduation) and equitable outcomes (providing access and ensuring success for all students, including those from under-represented racial groups). In order for institutions to be considered for this prestigious distinction, they must achieve excellence in all four of these areas. The Aspen Institute proposes that community college faculty play the most important role in helping their respective institutions achieve excellence by stating, "Anyone who has worked on a college campus knows why professors need to be engaged if excellence is to be achieved. In both the two- and four-year sectors, teachers are at the center of what colleges do" (Wyner, 2012, p. 16). While this statement is accurate in the sense that faculty are the center of higher education, the Aspen Institute fails to explicitly recognize any other employee sectors as playing a role in student success.

The 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, developed by the American Association of Community Colleges, provides a second framework for strategic planning and addressing change. This initiative was launched in 2011, and is chaired by notable leaders such as Walter Bumphus (President and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges), Augustine Gallego (Chancellor Emeritus of San

Diego Community College District), Kay McClenney (Director of the Center for the Community College Student Engagement) and Jerry Sue Thornton (President Emeritus, Cuyahoga Community College). The Commission’s intent is to thoroughly examine the challenges currently facing community colleges and provide strategies for change. After completing what the AACC called a *listening tour* of institutions across the U.S., the Commission created a goal similar to that of the American Graduation Initiative, of “educating an additional 5 million students with degrees, certificates, or other credentials by 2020” (AACC, 2012). Accomplishing this goal begins with challenging community colleges to “imagine a new future for themselves” in order to ensure student success. This new future should shift focus in a number of key areas, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Framework of Institutional Responses Needed to Move Community Colleges Ahead

SHIFT FROM	SHIFT TO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on student access • Fragmented course-taking • Low rates of student success • Tolerance of achievement gaps • A culture of anecdote • Individual faculty prerogative • A culture of isolation • Emphasis on boutique programs • A focus on teaching • Information infrastructure as management • Funding tied to enrollment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on student success • Clear, coherent pathways • High rates of student success • Eradicating achievement gaps • A culture of evidence • Collective responsibility for student success • A culture of collaboration • Effective education at scale • A focus on learning • Information infrastructure as learning • Funding tied to enrollment, institutional performance, and student success

Source: 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges

The Commission proposes a plan entitled “The Three Rs” in order to transform community colleges and re-imagine their purposes. The Three Rs consists of redesigning students’ educational experiences, reinventing institutional roles, and resetting the system to provide incentives for student and institutional success. Redesigning educational

experiences includes increasing completion rates, improving college readiness, and closing the American skills gap by focusing on career and technical education.

Reinventing institutional roles consists of refocusing the community college mission and collaborating with other institutions, philanthropic groups, government, and the private sector. Finally, resetting the system can be accomplished by targeting public and private investments to support community colleges and implementing rigorous accountability standards for all institutions. The 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges believes that following these recommendations will help Americans reclaim the currently endangered American Dream. Much like the Aspen Institute, the 21st Century Commission calls upon one group within the institution to lead the college into the future: “Change cannot be achieved without committed and courageous leaders. While many things need to happen to accomplish institutional transformation, none of them will happen without leadership” (AACC, 2012). While the Aspen Institute believes that faculty are the key to institutional change, the 21st Century Commission believes that the institutional leadership is the pivotal group.

A third perspective on organizational excellence comes from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce. NIST oversees the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program that provides improvement and innovation criteria for public and private U.S. organizations in six eligibility categories: education, health care, manufacturing, nonprofit/government, service, and small business (NIST, 2010). The Baldrige Program’s mission is “to improve the competitiveness and performance of U.S. organizations for the benefit of all U.S. residents” by developing and disseminating evaluation criteria, promoting performance

excellence, providing leadership in the learning and sharing of best practices.

Additionally, they oversee the annual Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards, which the President of the United States disseminates each year.

To meet the criteria and earn Baldrige approval, colleges are expected to demonstrate leadership and long-term planning, initiate measurable quality control processes, ensure the well-being of faculty and staff, and most importantly, work towards customer and stakeholder satisfaction (Izadi, Kashef, & Stadt, 1996). According to Badri et al. (2005), “The criteria argue strongly for customer-driven organizations, high levels of employee involvement, and information-based management.” This is exemplified by the fact that Customer Focus is its own category within the Baldrige Criteria, while other change models fail to even mention the importance of customer service. While strong leadership is certainly underlying in the Baldrige framework, its customer (student) driven focus and emphasis on employee involvement set it apart from other frameworks such as the Aspen and 21st Century 3Rs models.

Another model that has probably had the greatest impact on higher education pedagogy is the Learning College model, championed by leaders such as Terry O’Banion, Cynthia Wilson, Bob Barr, John Tagg, and Kay McClenney. The Learning College model is based on the idea that education should be focused on the learner rather than on the instructor or the institution. O’Banion’s seminal work on this subject, *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (1997) describes the typical climate at most higher education institutions, where the instructor is the expert or the center of the classroom and simply feeds information to passive students. Under this existing system, administrators appear as figureheads, and tend to set policy that is good for the instructor

as opposed to good for the student (O'Banion, 1997). These institutions follow a very traditional model, in which four primary issues hinder learning: time, place, efficiency, and role. O'Banion explains that under the traditional model, learning is time bound. Learning is defined by credit hours and semesters, which are artificial blocks of time imposed upon the students. Colleges expect that students will learn content within these prescribed boundaries, yet learning should be a continuous process. Learning is place bound, in that most learning is expected to take place on a campus, in traditional classrooms. Even though many institutions offer online or hybrid courses, the majority of classes are offered on-site. Learning is efficiency bound, because the United States educational system (especially in public elementary and secondary schools) is still following a calendar of early afternoon dismissals and summers off that were required when the economy was agriculturally-based and students had to return home to help on the family farm. Finally, and most importantly, traditional learning is role bound. Learning is supposed to occur because one individual (the instructor) disseminates knowledge to each student enrolled in his/her classes. This one individual is entirely responsible for students learning the course content or not.

Barr and Tagg (1995) explain that "the shift to a 'learning paradigm' liberates institutions from a difficult set of constraints" (p. 28) that are described above. Thus, O'Banion (1997) proposes a shift from the traditional, constrained system by removing the boundaries that have been in place for years and instituting a Learning College model. Under this model, students and their learning needs are the center of the college. O'Banion (1997) states, "The Learning College places learning first and provides

educational experiences for learners any way, any place, any time” (p. 47). The idea is based on six principles:

1. The Learning College (LC) creates a substantive change in all learners.
2. Learners become full partners in the learning process, and they are responsible for their own choices.
3. The LC offers as many options for learning as possible.
4. The LC encourages collaboration among students.
5. The roles of learning facilitators are defined based on the needs of the learners.
6. Success of the LC is based upon documented improvement in student learning.

O’Banion admits that launching a Learning College is a daunting task. In order to ease the institution into the process of launching the Learning College, institutional leaders need to capitalize on a key moment, or a *trigger event*. A trigger event does not need to be anything dramatic – it could be a project that the institution has already been working on, or a process that is underway. Rather than see it as business as usual, institutional leaders can use this event as a call for action or leverage for change.

O’Banion’s more recent work discusses reframing the community college based on the Student Success Pathway (SSP) model. He describes the SSP as a flexible, unique model that provides a visible roadmap for the business side of the community college in the form of a strategic or long-range plan, as well as for the students in the form of an individual educational plan (2013). The duality of the SSP differentiates it from other student success models that provide a framework for either the community college or for the students as opposed to both.

From the community college perspective, the SSP provides a framework for institutional planning. It is a roadmap of all policies, programs, practices, and courses that affect students from entrance to graduation. O’Banion (2013) states that the SSP “reflects

what colleges actually do to help students navigate the curriculum to successful completion, and what colleges actually do is the essence of the college's strategic and long-range plans" (p. 12). Each college can define their own components, such as connecting with high schools, providing developmental education, and offering student success courses, depending on their institutional priorities and available resources. Mapping out these components allows colleges to identify the points along the pathway where students struggle, fail, or drop out, and then plan interventions and new practices to increase student success at those key points. O'Banion encourages collaboration among faculty, administrators, support staff, and trustees to refine and enhance the institutional pathway by gathering together to answer questions such as:

- At which point in the pathway are we losing students?
- What milestones should we establish along the pathway that we can use to examine our progress?
- What resources are needed to keep the pathway functioning efficiently and effectively?
- Who in the institution is best qualified to implement the programs and practices along the pathway?

The answers to these questions should then guide the college's strategic and long-range planning processes in order to maintain institutional focus on student success.

In stark contrast to the Aspen Institute and 21st Century Commission models, both the Learning College and SSP models refer to the importance of involving all employee groups in institutional reform. O'Banion describes change as requiring participation from all key stakeholders, including administrators, full-time faculty, support staff, trustees, part-time faculty, students, and community representatives. Referencing organizational change consultant Margaret Wheatley, O'Banion discusses the absurdity of attempting

large-scale change by imposing change upon all stakeholders as opposed to involving them in the process (1997). In opposition, involving all stakeholders in the process allows all employee groups the opportunity to add to a student's learning experience. In describing how this idea looks when put into practice, Wilson (2011) explains, "learning becomes a joint venture between the learner and the rest of the college, with everyone – faculty, staff, administrators, other students, even community members – contributing in some meaningful way" (p. 215).

Overall, each of the frameworks (Aspen, 21st Century 3Rs, Baldrige, Learning College, and SSP) describe ways in which various groups of college employees can alter current processes and classroom norms to ensure that the necessary changes are made. The focus on administration and faculty as change proponents appears prevalent in the Aspen model and the 21st Century Commission 3 Rs model. Administrators and faculty will certainly play a large role in bringing about a new institutional culture, but all employees contribute to student success, not just faculty and administrators. The Learning College and SSP models and the Baldrige Criteria overtly encourage collaboration among all institutional stakeholders in working towards widespread student success. O'Banion notes that initiatives need to be "launched college wide by a critical mass of college faculty and staff" (2013, p. 16). In addition, the Baldrige Criteria are driven by student needs and employee involvement, which suggests that making a significant change will take commitment from all college employees and must focus on customer service.

The Importance of the Institutional Environment

Besides the varying degrees of employee involvement, another common thread uniting each of these change models is the notion that institutions must recreate the overall institutional environment in order to increase student retention and foster student success. This underlying premise can be traced to the works of notable scholar Vincent Tinto, who is known for his work on student persistence and model of student retention. Tinto's model of student retention is institutionally oriented and seeks to explain the "processes of interaction between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college" (Tinto, 1975, p. 94) that lead to student persistence or attrition. Tinto believes that student success or failure does not lie solely in the hands of the students; institutions are equally responsible for creating settings that encourage success (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). He argues that, unfortunately, many institutions do not take student retention seriously spend their time "tinkering at the margins of institutional life" (2006) rather than creating environments that are conducive to retaining students and assisting them in meeting their goals.

In order to improve retention efforts, Tinto's collective body of work promotes five conditions that he feels have a particularly strong impact when implemented:

1. **Commitment** – Commitment is more than a mission statement written on a brochure or posted on the institution's website. Colleges show commitment by their willingness to invest resources in programs and initiatives that will increase student persistence and success.
2. **Expectations** – Many institutions do not expect enough of their students. This is a basic condition for student success, as "no one rises to low expectations" (Tinto, 2006). This can particularly affect community colleges, where the stigma of being

no different or more challenging than high school often exists. Students are also more likely to succeed in settings where the high expectations and requirements are clear and consistent.

3. Support - For many students, entering college means exploring a new place, meeting new people, learning new ideas, accepting new responsibilities, setting priorities, and establishing and pursuing personal and academic goals. The transition to college can be difficult, even for high achieving students. Institutions can assist students through this stressful transition by offering support, including academic (tutoring, academic advising), personal (counseling, financial aid), and social (student clubs, teams). Students need to be aware that these types of support exist, and that they are readily available to all.
4. Feedback – Students are more likely to succeed in settings where they are given regular and timely feedback on their performance inside the classroom. This does not necessarily connote testing, as assessment of student performance can come in many forms.
5. Involvement - Students must be actively involved in learning rather than passively involved in order to have the desire to persist.

Fostering these conditions on campus creates an environment that makes students feel welcomed and valued members of the institutional community, which is especially crucial during their first year, when according to Tinto, “student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak” (2006, p. 3). When students feel they are welcomed and valued, their satisfaction with the institution increases, which is highly correlated with engagement and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987).

The question remains, however – how can institutions work to create the “institutionally powerful environment” that Tinto describes?

While there are differing opinions of how institutions can operationalize Tinto’s recommended conditions, Kuh and Love (2000) note that there is a linkage between these conditions on which institutions can focus: for students to succeed in college, they must be able to negotiate foreign campus environments and interact positively with others. Thus, the overall *campus environment* and *relationships* are the keys to student success. This point is underscored by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, which has surveyed two million community college students over the years. According to survey data, when students were asked to identify the most important thing that keeps them returning to school semester after semester, the top response was that a faculty member, counselor, advisor, or other person at the college knows them by name (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). O’Banion (2013) finds this to hold true as well, indicating that making a human connection on campus provides an anchor for students to stay in school. These connections are not limited to the classroom. They can occur when a student asks for information in the enrollment office, when a security guard provides directions to a building, or when a cafeteria worker chats with a student waiting in line during lunch. In fact, many significant interactions occur in the form of customer service provided by non-teaching support staff (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). While there is considerable debate in the literature as to whether students should be considered “customers” or not (Shumar, 1997; Demetriou, 2008; Boyd, 2012), the concept of customer service should be considered within higher education.

Importance of Customer Service in Higher Education

Customer service is often discussed in a business context; i.e., a means of enhancing customer satisfaction, resulting in repeat customers and increased profits for the business (Turban et al., 2012). While community colleges differ in a number of ways from a traditional business, the concept of customer service is equally applicable with the students functioning as customers. Businesses work towards achieving excellent customer service with the hope of attracting and retaining customers, so one can infer that colleges can use excellent customer service as a means of attracting and retaining students as well. A high level of customer service is beneficial to both the institution and the students. Speaking to the relationship between the student and the institution, Bejou (2005) notes, “The longer these ongoing transactions are satisfactory to both parties, the longer the relationship will endure, to the benefit of everyone” (p. 1). The number of students an institution can attract and retain directly affects a college’s finances in the form of enrollment revenue, and students must return semester after semester in order to complete their educational goals (Emery et al. 2001). While there is an increasing recognition of the importance of customer service in higher education, many institutions struggle to make it a priority or see its value in terms of student success. This is best illustrated via student satisfaction surveys.

In 2009, Noel-Levitz Higher Education Consultants published the 2009 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities report, which compiled data gathered between the fall of 2006 and the spring of 2009. Nearly 550,000 students participated in the research process, representing four-year institutions, community colleges, and career/technical schools. Students were asked to rate the importance of a variety of expectations as well as whether or not those expectations were met in regards to campus climate, student-

centeredness, institutional effectiveness, and service excellence. This report revealed performance gaps and a widespread dissatisfaction with “service run-around,” i.e. when students must travel to or contact multiple departments across campus before receiving an answer to their question or a resolution to their issue. For community colleges specifically, the top identified issue was institutional concern for students as individuals (Noel-Levitz, 2009). As noted in the report, “While the service run-around and concern for students as individuals sound like specific problems, they aren’t.” These issues are symptoms of several customer service issues, including: staff lacking knowledge of campus policies and procedures, staff not taking responsibility for student problems, and staff not being empowered to seek solutions. The report concludes with a recommendation for all higher education institutions to listen to their own students’ needs by conducting campus-specific satisfaction surveys and using the results to improve processes and procedures (Noel-Levitz, 2009).

A few years later, the Academic Impressions group surveyed professionals at 79 postsecondary institutions across the U.S., and found that over half would rate their school at a C or lower letter grade in customer service (AI, 2012). Among the respondents that assigned a C or failing grade, a variety of common issues emerged. One institution noted that many employees have a “don’t bother me” attitude when it comes to working with students, as well as an attitude that students should be grateful for any small amount of assistance that they are given. Others noted that department office hours are not conducive to student needs, while a third common issue is the lack of staff knowledge of institutional procedures, resulting in student confusion (AI, 2012). The overarching issues for these institutions appear to be a lack of student-centeredness, or a lack of focus

on customer needs, as well as lack of appropriate training for support staff. When asked for thoughts on improving customer service, respondents overwhelmingly used the word *responsiveness*. This indicates that customer service is more than a friendly attitude; it is primarily concerned with eliminating long wait times for students in need of assistance, as well as effectively removing obstacles that hinder a student's progression towards a degree. This could include difficulty registering for classes, receiving financial aid, or seeking student support services (AI, 2012).

Boyd (2012) notes that colleges have struggled to focus on customer service because they are more consumed with the final product, producing educated graduates, instead of the process. Often, these are the colleges that purely define quality education as quality classroom instruction (Sines, Jr. & Duckworth, 1994). Representing this point of view, Demetriou (2008) explains, "the term 'customer service' should stay in the business sector . . . Satisfaction is not an appropriate gauge of quality in higher education." It is unlikely that any education professional would disagree that quality classroom instruction is important and should remain a priority. However, if students do not feel satisfied during their time at the institution, they will not be retained long enough to complete a credential and graduate, which suggests that both the process and the final product need to be focused upon. The idea of customer service in higher education is not new; in 1994 Sines, Jr. and Duckworth indicated that "those institutions beginning a comprehensive customer service program will be the big winners, as competition becomes keener for students" (p. 2). The results of the more recent studies discussed here indicates, however, that over a decade later most institutions still have not made customer service a priority.

The Important Role of Support Staff

If, as the literature suggests, the institutional environment and customer service are both critical factors in the student success equation, then colleges must recognize these as areas in which all campus employees contribute. In fact, the institutional environment and customer service are two things that students experience from the moment that they initially make contact with the school, and these initial contacts are often with the non-teaching support staff (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). Thus, these support staff members comprise the institution's frontline and are primarily responsible for creating a student's initial impression of the institution, often based on effective customer service (Warshauer, 1998). In addition, student interaction with frontline/support staff does not stop once the student enrolls. It is an ongoing relationship that continues throughout a student's semesters, which indicates that these staff members have a role to play in student retention as well. In one of the few studies the researcher found relating specifically to support staff, "Exploring the Impact of Classified Staff Interactions on Student Retention" (2011), Schmitt and Duggan's multiple case study explores the idea that support staff interactions with students can either help or hinder student retention. They explain that several factors influence student persistence, but institutional environments have an important impact on student retention, as described in the works of Tinto (2007) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). They further suggest that support staff employees help to shape institutional environments in the same manner that faculty and administrators do. Schmitt and Duggan's findings show that support staff employees enhance students' educational experiences by "empowering students with information, offering individual support, and holding students accountable" (p. 179).

McClenney & Waiwaiole (2005) underscore this point by noting that it is in college's best interests to hire support staff that have a genuine interest in helping students.

Creating a Support Staff-Inclusive Environment

Shifting to an educational environment where every department and employee focuses on student success requires that colleges intentionally create a culture of collaboration on campus (Culp, 2005 and Dale & Drake, 2006). This type of culture often begins at the top, with supportive leadership who understand the important roles that all employees play. Dale and Drake (2006) explain that college leadership can facilitate a culture of collaboration by identifying collaboration as a core value in institutional missions and documents, while Culp (2005) emphasizes the importance of having employees from all areas of the college recognized for their efforts by top leadership. These actions (which may seem merely symbolic) can be bolstered by activities such as inviting employees from all groups across the college to participate on standing committees, or assigning diverse, cross-functional groups of employees to work on a specific project (Dale & Drake, 2006). An example of this can be found in institutions that participate in the Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative. ATD encourages broad engagement as a principle for program success, meaning that faculty, staff, and administrators share responsibility for student success and should collaborate on creation and assessment of programs and student services. Another tactic when working to create a culture of collaboration is to model it during the creation process by including all employees in discussing ways to change the culture (Gibson-Harman, Rodriguez, & Grant Haworth, 2002). This creates awareness of the need for collaboration and allows college leadership to demonstrate their expectations for collaboration to the college

community. Lastly, institutions can create a support staff-inclusive environment by offering growth opportunities that are more commonly available to faculty and administration in the form of professional development. As Fielden explains:

An institution must consider **all** its staff; administrative and support personnel can play crucial roles in helping students to learn, and in enabling and facilitating an environment that favors learning. If non-academic staff are committed to the goals of an institution, they can be valuable partners in working with academic colleagues. (1998)

McClenney (2009) agrees with Fielden's assessment: all college employees share the responsibility for student recruitment, retention, and ultimate success. Supplying support staff with professional development opportunities provides them with necessary training and fosters a sense of commitment to student success goals. With training and commitment, support staff can become valuable partners in an institution's student success efforts.

Professional Development Opportunities

The purpose of community colleges is to deliver services to students in the form of education, support, and opportunities. They depend upon people in order to deliver these services, and thus the quality of the employees is central to institutional effectiveness (Fielden, 1998). Shifting to an educational environment where all employees are focused on student success requires all employees to function at peak performance and understand how their role supports the students. In order for employees to function at peak performance, they must have ample access to ongoing professional development opportunities. McPhail (2013) explains that, unlike secondary educators, postsecondary faculty and staff often enter their positions with little formal training in the education field. She notes that "this absence of professional training might have remained

under the radar if the accountability spotlight had not shifted from access to success,” with an emphasis on student learning outcomes. While it is often the case that postsecondary faculty do not have formal education training, a literature search on professional development opportunities for higher education professionals reveals that the situation is not so dire for faculty and administrators. The literature is replete with opportunities for both of these employee groups, within their respective institutions and through external organizations. VanDerLinden (2005) believes that higher education institutions intentionally enhance administrators’ skills to provide status and allow for movement within the organization. This belief was confirmed in Hull and Keim’s 2007 national study of leadership/administrative development opportunities in community colleges. Out of the 286 colleges that participated, Hull and Keim report that 246 (86%) offered internal workshops and seminars for their administrative staff. On the faculty side, many institutions offer faculty academies for both full and adjunct faculty members, which are commonly a contractual requirement for faculty beginning their careers in higher education. Based on their respective websites, colleges such as Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan, Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, Virginia, and Pikes Peak Community College in Colorado Springs, Colorado all describe faculty academy programs offered at their institutions. In addition, external organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges and the Higher Learning Commission offer conferences and online training sessions aimed primarily at faculty and administrative employees, evidenced by their conference and seminar focus on topics such as teaching practices, assessment, and leadership skills (AACC, 2014; Higher Learning Commission, 2014). Administrators have the additional benefit of longer-term

programs such as the Chair Academy and the American Council on Education ACE Fellows program.

In stark contrast to the large number of professional development options for faculty and administration, a literature search for support staff training opportunities reveals very little. One can infer then that even in institutions that emphasize professional development, this emphasis is not widespread to include all employees. Without proper professional development and training opportunities, support staff cannot be fully engaged in creating an environment that supports student success and the students become the group that ultimately suffers (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011).

In order to provide examples of the current level of professional development opportunities available to support staff at community colleges, the researcher searched the websites of the community colleges listed as League for Innovation in the Community Colleges Vanguard Learning Colleges, looking specifically at their human resources web pages for available professional development/staff training programs. According to the League, Vanguard Learning Colleges are those that exemplify the Learning College concept and “are developing and strengthening policies, programs, and practices across their institutions with a focus on the five project objectives: organizational culture, staff recruitment and development, technology, learning outcomes, and underprepared students” (League for Innovation in the Community College, 2000). Given that a criterion for becoming a Vanguard Learning College is staff development, one would assume that these colleges would provide strong examples of support staff development programs. This search produced mixed results, as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Vanguard Learning College Professional Development Offerings

INSTITUTION	LOCATION	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFERINGS
Cascadia Community College	Bothell, WA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic plan mentions two PD days per year for all staff, no other information available.
Community College of Baltimore County	Catonsville, MD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers separate programs for faculty and staff.
Community College of Denver	Denver, CO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No information available.
Humber College	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only able to locate PD offerings for full-time faculty.
Kirkwood Community College	Cedar Rapids, IA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only able to locate PD offerings for full-time faculty.
Lane Community College	Eugene, OR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers separate programs for faculty and staff.
Madison Area Technical College	Madison, WI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicates that PD offerings are for all staff; however, only faculty and administration offerings discussed.
Palomar Community College	San Marcos, CA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board policy for professional development indicates that it is specifically for faculty.
Moraine Valley Community College	Palos Hills, IL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers faculty and staff professional development opportunities, as well as a Leadership Academy for which all employees are eligible to apply.
Richland College	Dallas, TX	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual core professional development requirements for all full-time employees, 26 hours total.
Sinclair Community College	Dayton, OH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two departments for PD – one for support, administrative, and professional staff, one for faculty. Offers staff “mini sabbaticals” to attend training, at a max. cost of \$1,000. Application required.
Valencia Community College	Orlando, FL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple faculty development programs, nothing specific to support staff.

The researcher recognizes that information on professional development offerings may not be publicly posted on each institution’s website, which is a limitation of this search, as well as the fact that each institution was named a Vanguard Learning College in the year 2000 (League for Innovation in the Community College, 2000). However, the findings presented here show that even amongst colleges where staff development was at one time a priority, they currently do not promote it prominently. Out of the twelve colleges listed, only four (Lane Community College, Moraine Valley Community College, Richland College, and Sinclair Community College) appear to have robust professional development offerings specifically for the support staff population. Primary

topics for staff development at these three institutions include customer service, computer skills, diversity training, and time management. The remaining institutions appear heavily invested in faculty development, but little else.

The researcher also searched for articles in scholarly journals highlighting staff development programs and only located one, dated 2002. Metropolitan Community College (MCC) in Omaha, Nebraska is one college that has worked to create professional development opportunities for support staff equivalent to those offered to faculty and administrators (Friesen, 2002). The college states:

To be a fully participating member of the organization, each employee must have a common understanding of Metro (MCC), its core values, practices, and constituencies . . . staff development programs and courses must ensure that all employees are provided with the opportunity to develop the basic understanding required to serve as facilitators of learning . . . (*MCC Faculty and Staff Development Catalog of Courses*, 1996, p. 1, cited in Friesen, 2002)

MCC has established professional development requirements for all employees, from support staff to administrators. Each employee is required to complete thirty-two contact hours of professional development activities per year. Staff members are able to make choices in regards to their professional development activities, as there are over two hundred open enrollment options offered during the workday, in the evenings, and on the weekends. This model has been in place at MCC since 1997, and it continues to evolve in response to employee and institutional needs. This initiative prepares all employees to collaborate and work towards widespread student success, including the support staff.

Summary

Internal and external forces are creating challenges for community colleges, and these challenges have the potential to negatively affect student success. In response to these forces, including changing student demographics, the evolving community college mission, and financial issues, community colleges are looking to implement large-scale change initiatives that focus on increasing student success. Colleges are currently using a number of frameworks/models to initiate change, including the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, the American Association of Community College's 21st Century 3Rs model, the Baldrige Criteria, the Learning College model, and the Student Success Pathway model. A common thread uniting each of these change models is the notion that institutions must recreate the overall institutional environment in order to increase student retention and foster student success. Shifting to an educational environment where all employees are focused on student success requires all employees to function at peak performance and understand how their role supports the students. In order for employees to function at peak performance, they must have ample access to ongoing professional development opportunities. Unfortunately, support staff members are often removed from consideration when it comes to student success initiatives, and are not provided access to equivalent professional development opportunities as the faculty and administration.

Support staff employees play a vital role in assisting students, and could play a more robust role in student success initiatives if colleges were willing to create a more support-staff inclusive culture on campus. One way to accomplish this is to offer support staff employees additional access to the types of professional development opportunities that are currently offered to faculty and administrators. With training and commitment, support staff can become valuable partners in an institution's student success efforts.

CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

As the literature review reveals, there is little published research that addresses the role community college support staff play in student success initiatives. In addition, there is a lack of research concerning professional development opportunities for support staff to prepare them to participate in student success initiatives. As such, the purpose of this study is to explore the role community college support staff play in student success initiatives from the perspectives of students, support staff, and administrators at a Midwest community college. The researcher believes that a better understanding of this issue could allow college support staff the opportunity and appropriate training to assist students in achieving their educational goals. In seeking to understand this topic, the study addressed the following questions: (1) Is there a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction? (2) Do support staff employees perceive that they have a role in supporting student success? If they do, what is that perception, and how does it compare to support staff perceptions at other institutions? (3) What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success? (4) What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required support staff skills?

This chapter describes the study's research methodology. It also includes information concerning the following areas: rationale for research approach (page 54), context for the study (page 62), overview of research plan (page 63), literature review (page 65), IRB approval (page 65), participant selection (page 66), data collection (page 68), data analysis (page 70), validity, reliability, and ethical issues (page 75), and limitations and delimitations (page 76).

Rationale for Research Approach

Based on a review of research methods the researcher determined that a concurrent mixed methods approach was the most appropriate for this study. A mixed methods study allowed the researcher to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. As Creswell (2008) noted, mixed methods research "is more than simply collecting and analyzing both kinds of data; it also involves the use of both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of a study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research" (pg. 4). In a concurrent mixed methods study, the researcher seeks to incorporate the findings from one method with the findings from a second method in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of the research problem. This study utilized a quantitative approach in order to determine support staff perceptions of the correlation between student success and support staff interaction at the primary research institution, Medlock Community College. Those findings were combined with the qualitative portion of the study, in which the researcher explored the concepts in detail using one-on-one interviews with community college support staff and administrators from the primary institution. A second quantitative aspect also occurred within the primary institution, in which the researcher conducted a survey of current

students so that three different levels of perspectives (student, support staff, and administration) could be included in the in-depth, single institution analysis. The researcher anticipated that drawing on multiple forms of data with the combined use of qualitative and quantitative approaches within one institution would lead to an expanded understanding of support staff and their role in student success. The quantitative support staff survey was repeated at three other Midwest community colleges (see Table 3). Those findings were compared to those from Medlock Community College. By doing so, the researcher hoped to determine whether the identified support staff perceptions of their role in student success were unique to the primary institution or prevalent in other institutions as well.

Table 3. Data Collection Methods Used in This Study

MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONS	MEDLOCK COMMUNITY COLLEGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Staff Survey (Quantitative) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Staff Survey (Quantitative) • Student Survey (Quantitative) • Support Staff Interviews (Qualitative) • Administrative Interviews (Qualitative)

Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods research approaches have gained popularity in recent years, especially in the social and human science fields where a purely quantitative or qualitative approach may not adequately address complex research problems (Creswell, 2008). Quantitative research can provide a general understanding of a problem after gathering data from a large number of people; qualitative research can provide a specific understanding of a problem after gathering detailed information from a much smaller number of people (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). While quantitative and qualitative research methods have their strengths, each has limitations as well. With quantitative approaches involving large numbers of participants, the detailed perspective of the

individual can be lost. In contrast, detailed accounts from smaller numbers of participants in a qualitative study reduce the generalizability of results to a larger population. Thus, the need exists for mixed methods studies so that the strengths of each method can offset the limitations of the other. The combination of both approaches can provide a fuller explanation of the research phenomenon than either method in isolation. Within the context of this study, the researcher aimed to use quantitative research methods to examine the research questions at multiple institutions using survey methodology. This provided the researcher with a broad perspective from a larger number of people. Qualitative methods were used to explore this issue in greater depth at a single institution, capturing detail from a smaller number of study participants.

Mixed Methods Procedure Design

Several factors can influence the procedure design for mixed methods studies, including: timing, weighting, mixing, and theorizing (Creswell, 2008). Timing refers to the order in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected during the study – either in phases (sequentially) or simultaneously (concurrently). If the researcher chooses to collect data in phases, he/she will need to determine whether the qualitative or quantitative phase should occur first, depending on the intent of the research. If qualitative data collection occurs first, it indicates that the researcher's intent is to explore the topic in-depth with a small group of participants and then broaden the scope to a large sample (representative of the population) with a quantitative data collection process. The opposite can also occur, where the researcher begins with examining a large sample through quantitative means and then exploring the same topic with a smaller group of participants using qualitative methods. In contrast, concurrent collection processes often are the result of a limited period in which to conduct research; a concurrent process

means that the researcher can accomplish all data collection at roughly the same time. In this study, the researcher conducted data collection concurrently because the quantitative and qualitative phases addressed different populations and organizations. The results of one phase did not specifically inform the data collection of the second phase, so a sequential approach was not necessary.

Weighting refers to the priority given to the qualitative and quantitative research in the mixed methods study. The weight may be equal, or one form may be given higher weight than the other form. As with timing, the weighting of research depends on the intent of the researcher, the audience for the study, and what is expected to be accomplished with the study results (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the researcher used the quantitative and qualitative data as two separate pieces that provided an “overall composite assessment of the problem” (Creswell, 2008, p. 214), yet the qualitative data served as the primary method of data collection and provided data that ultimately guided the project. The quantitative data functioned in a supportive role.

Mixing the data involves the questions of *how* and *when*. How will the researcher mix the qualitative and quantitative data, and at what point in the research will the mixing occur? According to Creswell (2008), data mixing can occur at three different phases: data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. The researcher could also choose to mix the data during all three phases. Because the quantitative and qualitative collection phases occurred concurrently in this study, neither phase relied on or influenced the other during data collection, nor did the analysis of one phase inform the data collection of the second phase. For example, the support staff survey results will not influence the support staff interview process. The survey results did not provide an indication of whom to

interview, what questions to ask, etc. In this study, the primary aim was to collect one form of data and have the second form provide supportive information. This type of mixing is referred to as embedding, which occurs during the data interpretation phase (Creswell, 2008).

The last factor to consider when planning mixed method procedures is whether a theoretical perspective guides the design. While all researchers bring theories, frameworks, and hunches to their work, these can be made explicit in a study or remain implicit (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). Orienting a study with an explicit theory will shape the data collection, interpretation, and analysis phases. This study operated under an assumption as opposed to an explicit theory. The researcher assumed that support staff employees play an important role in creating an institutional culture focused on student success. However, the researcher refrained from explicitly stating this as a theory. The data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases were used to determine whether this assumption should be presented as an explicit theory in the later chapters focused on research findings and recommendations.

The four factors previously described (timing, weighting, mixing, and theorizing) assisted the researcher in shaping the procedures for a mixed methods study. Determining how each of these factors would play a role in the research led the researcher to identify a primary design for the study. Given the parameters that the researcher determined for this particular study, the mixed methods approach utilized was a concurrent embedded strategy. Simultaneous, or concurrent, data collection characterizes this strategy; with a primary strategy that guides the study (qualitative, in this case) and a secondary strategy (quantitative) that provides support to the process. Embedding is a mixing strategy that is

often used when data collection methods address different research questions, or when the researcher is studying different levels of an organization (Creswell, 2008; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This particular study combined both of these situations. The quantitative method sought to determine perceptions of a potential correlation between support staff interaction and student success from the perspective of both students and support staff at multiple institutions. The qualitative phase sought to determine a deeper understanding of support staff perceptions of their roles in student success. It also sought to determine the necessary skills that can enhance the role that support staff employees play in student success from the perspectives of both support staff and administration at a single institution. Multiple questions were examined, and the researcher solicited input from multiple organizational levels.

Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

This study was a mixed methods study, which provided an overall framework and strategy for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. However, both the quantitative and qualitative phases had different approaches that must be identified as well. The purpose of the quantitative aspect to this study was to examine the relationship between support staff interaction and student success. Survey research was conducted in order to provide a numeric description of this relationship by studying samples of the community college student and support staff population. A survey was the preferred type of data collection procedure in examining this issue, largely due to its streamlined approach and the potential for rapid turnaround in data collection (Creswell, 2008). It would have been extremely difficult, logistically speaking, to individually interview large numbers of students or support staff members in regards to the correlation between support staff interaction and student success. The study utilized an online survey to reach a large

sample of the student and support staff populations within minutes. The researcher was able to obtain basic information from large sample size, which increases the generalizability of the results (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). The results were supplemented with detailed qualitative accounts from support staff and administration interviews from a single institution, referred to as the primary institution within this study. Administering the support staff surveys to multiple institutions also served for comparison purposes during the data analysis and interpretation phases and used to compare the primary institution's support staff survey results to those from other institutions.

Within the framework of the qualitative method, the researcher determined that a phenomenological approach was most appropriate approach for this study. Creswell (2008) defines phenomenological research as “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). Patton (2002) describes this specific type of qualitative research as based on “the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shares experiences . . . The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (cited in Merriam, 2009).

In order to understand the underlying meaning behind an experience or phenomenon, the phenomenologist uses interviews as the primary means of data collection (Merriam, 2009). It is important to note that before undertaking this type of interview, the researcher must set aside his or her own prior beliefs so as not to interfere with understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of the study participants. This process is referred to as *epoché*, or bracketing. All of the researcher's prior beliefs,

prejudices, and assumptions are bracketed, or set aside, for the duration of the study.

Another tool specific to phenomenological studies is horizontalization. This is the process of examining collected data with the assumption that all data has equal weight during the initial qualitative data analysis process, and observing from a distance to better examine it without bias (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008). The researcher then groups all data into categories or clusters and links the data thematically until a full description of the phenomenon is uncovered (Moustakas, 1994; Merriam, 2009). This full description becomes the final product of a phenomenological study, presenting the *essence* of the phenomenon in a way that others can understand what it is like to experience it from the perspective of a study participant (Polkinghorn, 1989).

The qualitative aspect to this study fit well with a phenomenological approach because it sought to better understand support staff members' perceptions of student success and how their positions facilitate or support student success initiatives at Medlock Community College (MCC). It also sought to understand the role support staff employees play in student success from the administrative perspective, as well as how the administration feels MCC could enhance staff members' abilities to support student success. Creating an educational environment where every department and employee focuses on student success requires all employees to function at peak performance and understand how their role supports student success. Faculty and administration are prepared for this through numerous opportunities for professional development in which they learn important tactics and strategies for working with and for students. This is not always the case for the remaining employee sector, college support staff. As a result, support staff interact and work with students on a daily basis, but the question remained

as to whether or not they understand the impact that they can have on student success and whether this is a consideration during their daily work. From the administrative perspective, the question remained as to how administrators feel that support staff fit in to the student success picture, and what steps, if any, administration takes to enhance support staff roles. Phenomenological research methods during the qualitative data collection process allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth study of the following research questions:

- Do support staff employees perceive that they have a role in supporting student success? If they do, what is that perception, and how does it compare to support staff perceptions at other institutions?
- What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success?
- What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required support staff skills?

During this process, the researcher engaged in an in-depth examination of support staff and administrative perceptions through one-on-one interviews at MCC.

Context for the Study

The qualitative aspect and student survey aspects of this study took place within Medlock Community College, located in a suburban area of the Midwest. This was considered the primary research site for this study. The college serves approximately 14,000 students each fall and winter semester, with more than 100 degree and certificate programs at one main campus and one satellite location. There were a total of 180 full time faculty, 47 administrative employees, and 153 support staff employees at the time of

this study. MCC has a department dedicated to employee professional development that has traditionally dedicated its resources to providing professional development programs to faculty members. During the same year in which this study occurred, the department slowly began to expand its professional development offerings to include other campus employee groups, such as administration and support staff.

The data collected from MCC was combined with support staff quantitative survey data gathered from three other Midwest institutions.

Overview of the Research Plan

The following list provides a summary of the steps that were used to carry out this study. Detailed discussions of each step immediately follow.

1. A review of the literature was conducted in order to study and consider the contributions of other researchers on the topics of support staff, support staff contribution to student success, and professional development for support staff.
2. Preceding any data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the institutional review board (IRB), per federal and university guidelines (FSU Institutional Review Board). The IRB approval application included an outline of all processes and procedures used in this study in order to ensure that all standards relating to human subject research were adhered to during data collection and analysis.
3. Eligible participants were determined from multiple institutions for the support staff survey. Eligible participants were determined at the primary institution for the student survey, support staff survey, support staff

interviews, and administrative interviews, as described in the forthcoming *Eligibility* section.

4. Online support staff surveys were sent to all support staff members who met the eligibility criteria from each institution. Results were analyzed in order to determine if a correlation exists between support staff interaction and student success from the support staff perspective at multiple institutions.
5. Online student surveys were sent to a random sample of 500 students who met the eligibility criteria from Medlock Community College. Results were analyzed in order to determine if a correlation exists between support staff interaction and student success from the student perspective.
6. In-depth interviews were conducted with six eligible support staff members from Medlock Community College. Results were analyzed.
7. In-depth interviews were conducted with six eligible administrative staff members from Medlock Community College. Results were analyzed.
8. All quantitative and qualitative data was compiled for interpretation as different pieces of a complete picture of the research problem.

**Note: As this study used concurrent embedded mixed methods strategy, steps 4 through 8 occurred concurrently as opposed to sequentially, dependent upon participant schedules.*

Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted to inform this study. Two primary topics were identified for the researcher to focus on: community college support staff correlation to student success, and professional development for community college support staff. The literature reviewed included articles, books, dissertations, and reports,

with the goal of using primarily peer reviewed scholarly materials. The purpose of the review was to gain a better understanding of the current body of literature surrounding the role of support staff in community colleges, as well as identify any existing professional development programs for support staff employees. Search strategies included the use of the ProQuest database portal, which is a data portal that simultaneously searches multiple specific databases, including Academic OneFile, Education Abstracts, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), Educator's Reference Complete, ProQuest Dissertations, Sage Journals Online, and Wilson Select Plus. Additional resources were obtained from professional organizations such as the League for Innovation in the Community College and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC).

IRB Approval

In accordance with federal regulations and Ferris State University policy, the researcher obtained IRB approval from both Ferris State University and Medlock Community College before conducting any research required for this study. The IRB application included information regarding the intended subject population, subject recruitment, prior association with subjects, the proposed research procedures/data collection methods, benefits of conducting the research, potential risks to subjects, consent procedures, and privacy assurances.

Participant Selection

Eligibility

Participants were selected from multiple institutions for the quantitative support staff survey. The researcher worked with each college's institutional research office in

order to identify the staff members that are classified as full-time support staff. Primary study participants (for both quantitative and qualitative sections) were selected from Medlock Community College and consisted of students, full time support staff members, and administrative staff. The researcher worked with the college institutional research office in order to obtain lists of employees classified as support staff and administration at MCC. All full-time employees meeting either of those classifications were considered eligible participants for this study. The researcher also worked with the MCC institutional research office in order to obtain a list of current students for the student survey.

Exclusions

The researcher is an employee at one of the institutions participating in this study. In order to eliminate any perception of coercion to participate in this study, the researcher excluded from eligibility any employees who work within her immediate department. In addition, the student survey excluded all students attending Medlock who were under the age of 18 at the time of this study, including those participating in dual enrollment and early college programs.

Population and Sample

The researcher used one type of sampling method in this study, purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling, in which the sample is gathered deliberately and with a specific purpose in mind (Vogt, 2007). This sampling method was used to gather the quantitative student and support staff data, because all current students age 18 and older and all full time support staff members were purposely selected to participate, as opposed to a random sample from these groups. In addition, purposive sampling was used for all qualitative aspects of this study. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) indicate, qualitative researchers typically use the term *research participants*

or *selected participants* as opposed to *sample*. Quantitative research methods are characterized by sampling methods that are often based on statistical probability theory, as is the case with the student survey within this study. In contrast, qualitative researchers purposefully select their study participants based on the likelihood that these participants will provide information that will lead to increased insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, many qualitative researchers refer to this method as *criterion-based selection* as opposed to *purposeful*, because according to Merriam (2009), researchers undertaking qualitative studies “create a list of attributes essential to the study, and then proceed to find or locate a unit matching the list” (p. 77).

For this study, the researcher worked with each college’s institutional research office to identify all employees classified as support staff members, and all employees under this classification received the initial support staff survey. At Medlock Community College, this same list of employees was considered for interviews, based on the predetermined criteria described. Additionally, all employees classified as administrators at Medlock were considered for interviews, based on the predetermined criteria described.

Interview Selection Criteria

Qualitative research emphasizes understanding of an event, phenomenon, group, or culture. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) describe, “[Researchers] are not seeking to determine any single causal explanation, to predict, or to generalize” (p. 180). As such, this portion of the study did not rely on random sampling techniques when selecting interview participants. Rather, the researcher sought to identify participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation and who will yield fruitful, relevant information. The goal was for the researcher to select participants who would

assist in uncovering the essence of an experience. The researcher identified a group of potential support staff and administrative interview participants who represent the following characteristics:

- Who are representative of each division within the college with a variety of skill sets
- Who have varying lengths of longevity at MCC
- Who are both male and female
- Who are representative of the diversity found on campus

The researcher was able to achieve these criteria in both support staff and administrative interviews.

Data Collection

Mixed methods research studies are unique in the sense that the researcher gets to function in two vastly different ways. In survey-based quantitative research, the researcher's role is virtually nonexistent, apart from the initial dissemination of the survey instrument (Vogt, 2007). Qualitative research, in sharp contrast, is characterized by having the researcher function as the primary means of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Data collection in this study consisted of survey questionnaires of the support staff population from each institution and a survey questionnaire of students from Medlock Community College. This data was compiled with data from in-depth interviews of individuals selected from the support staff and administrative population from MCC.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher developed all data collection instruments used in this study, with some questions guided by the work of Dr. Laura Weidner, administrator at Anne Arundel Community College. Dr. Weidner's work focused on the role of support staff in Learning College environments, thus certain questions regarding support staff perceptions of their role in a Learning College were adapted so that they would apply to support staff at any community college as opposed to a specific Learning College environment.

Representatives from the Ferris State University faculty, community college administrators, and community college research staff reviewed and evaluated the first draft of the survey questionnaires and interview questions. The researcher revised the questionnaires and interview questions in accordance with the evaluation feedback from these representatives. (See Appendix A for a copy of all survey instruments.)

Electronic versions of the support staff questionnaires were developed by the researcher, using Survey Monkey® software. The student survey was developed by the Medlock institutional research department, using Snap Survey software. The researcher tested both electronic questionnaires for functionality and ease of use.

Survey Data Collection

This study contained two survey questionnaires, one developed for all support staff participants and one developed for student participants. The support staff surveys were administered in the form of an online survey. An invitation to participate was sent to each eligible support staff employee using his or her institutional email address (see Appendix B for all survey participation invitations). These invitations explained the purpose of the research and included a link to the online survey. As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (1998), "extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm" (p. 70) when a study's

object of inquiry are human beings. In order to ensure that the study participants had a thorough understanding of the study and their associated role, an informed consent document was attached to the invitation (see Appendix C). Participant consent was provided electronically in the first question of the online survey. If consent was not given, the participant was unable to access the remainder of the survey. Support staff participants had 14 days to complete the survey, and the researcher sent a reminder email one week after the initial invitation was sent in order to encourage participation.

The researcher administered the student surveys in the same format. Invitations to participate were sent to each student using their institutional student email address, and were sent out by the Medlock Communications Department. The invitations explained the purpose of the research and included a link to the online survey. An informed consent document was attached to the invitation. Participant consent was provided electronically in the first question of the online survey. If consent was not given, the participant was unable to access the remainder of the survey. Student participants had 14 days to complete the survey. The Medlock Communications Department sent a reminder email one week after the initial invitation was sent in order to encourage participation.

Interview Data Collection

The researcher contacted the selected interview participants from the support staff and administrative groups via email and invited them to participate in an interview with the researcher (see Appendix D for all interview questions). Invitations were extended to the initial sample of participants identified by the interview selection criteria previously described (see Appendix E for interview participation invitations). Participation in the interview process was voluntary, and the researcher anticipated that some potential participants would decline the invitation. An additional sample of individuals was

identified to receive an invitation if needed, which proved to be necessary. Email invitations were followed up by phone calls if the invitations remained unacknowledged after three days. The researcher recorded the interviews (with participant permission) and transcribed the interviews afterward. This allowed the researcher to provide full attention to the participant during the interview as opposed to trying to capture all notes while listening. Each participant received a copy of the interview transcription so that they could alter or adjust the information provided, as desired or deemed appropriate, before the researcher included the data in the study. All interview participants were given a choice of where to conduct the interview – either within their own workspace, in the researcher’s private workspace, or at a “neutral” location off-campus, depending on the participants comfort level with each location. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

All quantitative data in this study was collected through survey questionnaires. Questionnaires primarily consisted of closed-ended questions that limited the responses by providing a list of answer choices. Many were Likert scale questions, where respondents chose from a set of answers ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. All collected data was imported into IBM SPSS software for statistical analysis. Once imported into SPSS, the researcher coded the data collected from Likert scale questions by assigning a number for each response choice (for example, "strongly disagree" = 1, "disagree" = 2, etc.). All data was inspected for errors and cleaned as needed.

Quantitative data analysis in this study utilized descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used in describing the data through a measure of central tendency, standard deviations, and range of scores, while inferential statistics were used to make predictions about a population from the available data (Creswell, 2008). Once the data was imported, coded, and cleaned, the researcher used SPSS to calculate response frequencies and a measure of central tendency for each survey question. The researcher did not use the mean as the central tendency measure, since the data were nominal and ordinal as opposed to interval. The mode, or the most frequent response, was used as the measure of central tendency for all survey questions. In order to ensure reliability of the survey instruments, the researcher used SPSS to calculate Cronbach's alpha. According to Vogt (2007), "Cronbach's alpha is a correlational measure of the reliability or consistency of items in a scale. It tells you the extent to which people who answered some questions favorably or unfavorably about 'X' tended to do so on all items" (p. 90). If this test shows that people did not answer in a consistent manner, then the survey questions were more than likely not measuring the same thing and to summarize the results into one overall scale would be similar to adding apples and oranges. Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1.0, with the cut-off point for reliability at .70 or higher. The researcher ensured that the questionnaires in this study met the minimum reliability standards.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) believes that data analysis in phenomenological studies involves "ferreting out the essence or basic structure of a phenomenon" (p. 199). Because qualitative studies can accumulate a large amount of data during the data collection phase, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) recommend that the researcher use a continuous data

analysis process as opposed to collecting all data first and then attempting to analyze after. Simultaneously collecting and analyzing data allows the researcher to shape and direct the study based on the information that is discovered along the way. For example, when reviewing initial interview transcripts, the researcher could uncover a similar theme that they wish to explore further during future interviews. For this study, the researcher followed recommendations set forth by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) for conducting a simultaneous data collection and analysis process:

1. Make decisions that narrow the study. Researchers can attempt to pursue too many different directions during data collection and analysis, which often leads to amassing a large amount of information that is too diffuse to be of real value.
2. Develop analytic questions. If the initial data collection process reveals that interview questions are too general, revise the questions in order to gather robust information.
3. Write comments and memos during all data collection activities and review notes frequently. This will allow the researcher to identify specific leads to pursue during future data collection efforts.
4. Test ideas and themes on the participants. If the researcher notices a specific pattern developing during data collection, it can be helpful to ask participants if those themes are appropriate.

Data analysis for the qualitative aspect to this study involved the constant comparative method of data analysis. The researcher reviewed and annotated all interview notes and transcripts in order to “cluster” the data into themes, recurring ideas, and common

language (Merriam, 2009). The analysis was conducted with the research questions in mind – all themes and commonalities were coded and compiled into a database organized by research question (See Appendix H).

Mixed Methods Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2008), data mixing can occur at three different phases: data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation; the researcher could also choose to mix the data during all three phases. In this study, the researcher collected one form of data and had the second form provide supportive information. This type of mixing is referred to as embedding, which occurs during the data interpretation phase (Creswell, 2008). The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately using the methods described, and results were combined during the discussion of findings presented in Chapter 4.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Issues

In conducting applied field research, there are many more threats to validity than one might find in a laboratory setting. Chief among these threats that may affect this study are self-selection effects and attrition (Vogt, 2007). Self-selection effects may have been an issue during survey data collection, due to the nature of the topic and the questions posed. The surveys intended to determine student perceptions of support staff and the role that support staff have played or will play in student success, and support staff perceptions of their own role as well. From the student perspective, students who have previously had significant interactions (whether positive or negative) may have been more inclined to respond to the survey over a student who has had little significant interaction, which would mean that the results from the survey may be skewed as a result.

In contrast, attrition occurs when participants elect to drop out of the research study. While this could have occurred with the interview participants in this study, the researcher did not conduct multiple interviews over a prolonged period, which resulted in no participant attrition during this study.

Reliability refers to the consistency of measurement – how consistent are multiple measurements of the same item/concept/idea? Reliability could be impacted by the student and support staff surveys. Participants may interpret the questions differently, or, since many of the questions are based on a Likert scale, participants could have different perceptions of the scale. The researcher used Cronbach's alpha in order to assess the survey reliability, as described in the *Quantitative Data Analysis* section.

With any research study, ethical considerations relating to the protection of participants are a concern (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). In order to protect study participants, the researcher took steps to ensure that all participation was voluntary and that all participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and how their answers to the surveys and interviews would be used. Informed consent was a priority throughout the survey and interview processes. Each survey participant was not able to access the survey questions without providing consent to participate in the study first. All interviewees also signed an informed consent document (see Appendix C). In addition, participant rights were considered during all data reporting and dissemination (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). All survey responses were anonymous and data was reported in aggregate. For the interviews, names and significant identifying characteristics of all participants were kept confidential during reporting and dissemination. The researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym, which was used in

Chapter 4. The researcher also took measures to ensure the security of all data files so that no one else was or will be able to access the information.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study contains potential limitations, some of which are general limitations of quantitative or qualitative research as a whole and some that are related directly to this study. With quantitative approaches involving large numbers of participants, the detailed perspective of the individual can be lost. In contrast, detailed accounts from smaller numbers of participants in a qualitative study reduce the generalizability of results to a larger population. The researcher addressed these limitations by using a mixed methods approach so that the strengths of each method can offset the limitations of the other. The combination of both approaches provided a fuller explanation of the research phenomenon than either method in isolation.

A limitation of this study in particular was that some students or employees from the colleges chose not to participate in the survey or interview process, despite assurances of anonymity. Because the survey questionnaires were distributed via email, there was a potential that student email addresses as listed in the college system were not valid or that students may simply have chosen not to respond. In anticipation of this potential limitation, the researcher sent the student survey invitation to a large sample size, all students enrolled during the Winter 2014 semester. The support staff survey was sent to employee email addresses. While these email addresses are most likely valid, using college email addresses to disseminate the survey could have caused support staff employees to refrain from participation. In anticipation of this limitation, the initial survey invitation to support staff members provided potential participants with the

researcher's personal email address, with the notation that support staff members could communicate with the researcher from their own external email account, thus removing any linkage from college email accounts.

A limitation of the qualitative aspect to this study concerns the data analysis phase. Data analysis in qualitative research rests exclusively with the researcher, and so research bias or subjectivity could be an issue (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). A key limitation of this study is the fact that the researcher was employed at a community college as a support staff member before assuming her current administrative role. The researcher took measures to offset this potential limitation by practicing bracketing, or setting aside prior beliefs, prejudices, and assumptions for the duration of the study.

The primary objective of this study was to examine perceptions of the role of support staff in student success at a Midwest institution. A delimiting factor of this study is the selection of the primary research institution, Medlock Community College, which restricts the sample for the qualitative aspect to this study. Therefore, the bulk of this study could be critiqued as having limited generalizability to other institutions, and yet the researcher would argue that generalizability was not the overall goal of this study. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative research seeks to be *transferable* as opposed to *generalizable*. Transferability refers to the ways in which study findings could be applicable in other settings that are similar to the research settings, as opposed to identical. Qualitative researchers can promote greater transferability by providing rich, thick descriptions of the participants and study context, which the researcher in this study strove to accomplish (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Rich, thick descriptions

will allow future study readers to determine if the research findings could apply to other situations.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology that was used in investigating the following research questions: (1) Is there a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction? (2) Do support staff employees perceive that they have a role in supporting student success? If they do, what is that perception, and how does it compare to support staff perceptions at other institutions? (3) What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success? (4) What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required support staff skills? In order to examine these questions, the researcher conducted a concurrent mixed methods study, incorporating the findings from one method with the findings from a second method to provide a comprehensive assessment of the research problem. The data was collected using surveys and interviews, and analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. Chapter 4 will discuss the research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR FINDINGS

Introduction

In seeking to understand the role community college support staff play in student success, this study addressed the following questions: (1) Is there a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction? (2) Do support staff employees perceive that they have a role in supporting student success? If they do, what is that perception, and how does it compare to support staff perceptions at other institutions? (3) What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success? (4) What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required support staff skills?

The researcher conducted this study using a concurrent mixed methods approach, as outlined in Chapter 3. The majority of the study research occurred at a primary institution located in the Midwest (pseudonym Medlock Community College), with supporting research for question two occurring at other Midwest community colleges. Research at the primary institution included a student survey, a support staff survey, support staff interviews, and administrative interviews. Supporting data for the second research question was gathered from multiple institutions using a support staff survey. See Table 4.

Table 4. Data Collection Methods Used in This Study: Research Question 2

MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONS (SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 2)	PRIMARY INSTITUTION: MEDLOCK COMMUNITY COLLEGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Staff Survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Staff Survey • Student Survey • Support Staff Interviews • Administrative Interviews

Context for the Study

In order to understand the data and associated meanings presented in this chapter, it is important to understand the organizational culture and work environment existing at the primary institution at the time of this study. The researcher began by conducting background research, examining Medlock’s organizational structure, employee contracts, and documents outlining college policy and procedures. In addition, the researcher bracketed any information gathered from the subsequent survey and interview processes that related to the organizational culture, and considered this information as part of the context for the study. The following paragraphs describe insights gathered from this preliminary data collection process.

Historically, a large share of Medlock Community College’s institutional governance has been the responsibility of what the college refers to as the Core Team (pseudonym). The Core Team consists of all full-time faculty, administrators, and executive/Cabinet-level staff. Full/part-time support staff are not considered part of the Core Team, and thus are unable to attend the Core Team meetings that occur at least once per semester. The researcher reviewed the agendas and meeting minutes from Core Team meetings occurring within the past two years. Based on this review, the researcher concluded that these meetings function as the primary means of communication with

employees at the beginning of each semester. Campus news is shared, employees are recognized for their achievements, and current and upcoming initiatives are discussed. In addition, this body of employees is responsible for voting on any proposed changes in college policy during these meetings. In order for a policy to be created or changed, it must be approved by the Core Team.

The Medlock Core Team promotes shared governance through the use of committees, with 14 committees existing at the institution. All campus committees are comprised of members drawn from the Core Team. Since the support staff are not a part of this group, they are not represented on any of these committees. The support staff have petitioned the college to be included in the Core Team at various times, but their requests were not considered until the Fall 2013 semester, when a restructuring and change in college leadership occurred. At that time, a taskforce was formed with the purpose of examining governing structures to create a more equitable campus environment. At the time of this dissertation, that taskforce was in the midst of their work.

Medlock's Core Team operates under a constitution. According to the Core Team Constitution, three groups play the most important roles in the government of American colleges and universities: faculty, administrators, and governing boards" (Core Team Handbook, 2012, p. 13). In addition, "the faculty . . . is the essential participant, by virtue of its particular competence" (p. 13). It was reported to the researcher during the survey and interview process that college employees who are members of the Core Team have reinforced the belief that only three groups are essential in governing a college and anyone who does not agree with this belief is not looked upon favorably within the group. However, it was also noted by some that a microculture of employees who believe in

equality for all does exist within the Core Team, and these employees are supportive of the support staff group in their plight to achieve Core Team membership.

Data Collection Process

Data collection in this study consisted of survey questionnaires of the support staff population from each institution and a survey questionnaire of students from Medlock Community College. Questionnaire data was compiled with data from in-depth interviews of individuals selected from the support staff and administrative population at MCC. The researcher anticipated that drawing on multiple forms of data with the combined use of qualitative and quantitative approaches within one institution would lead to an expanded understanding of support staff and their role in student success. The support staff survey was repeated at three other Midwest community colleges. These findings were compared to those from Medlock Community College during the data analysis process for the second research question. By following this data collection process, the researcher hoped to determine whether the identified support staff perceptions of their role in student success is unique to the primary institution or prevalent in other institutions as well.

Medlock Community College Student Questionnaire

Data collection for the student questionnaire occurred between February 5, 2014 and February 19, 2014. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was sent electronically to all Medlock students enrolled in classes during the Winter 2014 semester; the total population of potential respondents was 14,895. Invitations to participate (see Appendix B) included a link to the online survey and were sent to students on the researcher's behalf from the Medlock Communications department. All communication to students

was conducted using the students' college email addresses. As indicated in Chapter 3, all students enrolled in Winter 2014 classes who were under the age of 18 were excluded through a process that linked Winter 2014 enrollees with the birthdate listed in their institutional student record. Initial invitations to participate were sent out on February 5, 2014. A reminder was sent to the same population of students one week into the data collection period, February 12, 2014. At the questionnaire closing date, a total of 866 responses were received, a response rate of 6%.

A preliminary analysis of the responses revealed that there were nine respondents who did not report their age, 44 respondents who indicated that they were under the age of 18 (despite the initial removal of any students under the age of 18 as reported in their institutional record), and 52 respondents who answered or partially answered the questionnaire more than once. In order to ensure data integrity and compliance with the identified study exclusions, these 105 responses were removed from the data file, reducing the number of responses to 761 for a response rate of 5%.

Medlock Community College Support Staff Questionnaire

Data collection for the Medlock support staff questionnaire occurred between January 16, 2014 and January 30, 2014. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was sent electronically to all Medlock support staff as identified by their classification in the campus support staff union. The total population of potential respondents was 157. Invitations to participate (see Appendix B) included a link to the online survey and were sent to all support staff directly from the researcher. All communication to support staff was conducted using the employees' college email addresses. Initial invitations to participate were sent out on January 16, 2014. A reminder was sent to the same population of support staff one week into the data collection period, January 23, 2014. At

the questionnaire closing date of January 30, 2014, a total of 41 responses were received for a response rate of 26%.

Medlock Community College Interviews

Data collection for the Medlock support staff and administrative interviews occurred between January 21, 2014 and March 6, 2014. Following the criteria outlined in Chapter 3, the researcher identified a group of potential support staff and administrative interview participants. The goal was to identify a diverse group of participants who represent the following characteristics:

- Are representative of each division within the college with a variety of skill sets
- Have varying lengths of longevity at MCC
- Are both male and female
- Are representative of the diversity found on campus

The researcher intended to achieve a total of six interviews with support staff members and six interviews with administrators. Six members of each group were identified and sent invitations to participate (see Appendix E).

Four out of the six initially identified support staff members chose to participate. Other support staff members were asked to participate until the researcher reached the desired six interviewees. In total, nine support staff employees were asked to participate and six agreed, which equates to a 67% participation rate of those invited to interview. Each participant was required to sign an informed consent document prior to his/her interview (see Appendix C) and each participant was asked the same primary set of interview questions (see Appendix D). Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the

researcher. The transcriptions were sent to the participants to review, edit, and approve before inclusion in the study data.

Five out of the six initially identified administrators chose to participate. Following the same process used to identify support staff interviewees, the researcher identified and invited additional employees to participate until the number of six participants was reached. In total, seven individuals were asked to participate and six agreed, which equates to an 86% participation rate of those invited to interview. Each participant was required to sign an informed consent document prior to his/her interview (see Appendix C) and each participant was asked the same primary set of interview questions (see Appendix D). Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions were sent to the participants to review, edit, and approve before inclusion in the study data.

Additional Midwest Community College Questionnaires

The researcher intended to administer the support staff survey (see Appendix A) at six additional Midwest community colleges of varying sizes and locations. Six colleges were identified and the researcher contacted each college's institutional research department. One college declined, indicating that surveys were not permitted on their campus. Two colleges did not respond to the researcher's inquiries. The remaining three agreed to participate. The researcher worked with each college's institutional research department in order to obtain access to support staff email addresses and disseminate the survey. Collection data periods and response rates are as noted in Table 5.

Table 5. Support Staff Questionnaire Data Collection – Other Midwest Institutions

INSTITUTION	COLLECTION PERIOD	NUMBER OF INVITATIONS	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	RESPONSE RATE
Institution A	February 3, 2014 to February 17, 2014	78	28	36%
Institution B	February 21, 2014 to March 7, 2014	145	55	38%
Institution C	March 17, 2014 to March 31, 2014	182	20	11%

Data Analysis Process

The researcher followed data analysis methodologies described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Creswell (2008), Merriam (2009), and Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data collected from questionnaires and interviews.

All quantitative data in this study was collected through survey questionnaires that primarily consisted of closed-ended and Likert scale questions. All collected data was imported into IBM SPSS software for statistical analysis. Data analysis in this study utilized both descriptive and inferential statistics. The researcher used SPSS to calculate response frequencies and the mode as a measure of central tendency for each survey question.

For the qualitative data analysis, the researcher began by following the four-step process for systematic data analysis set forth by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012). The steps in this methodology are as follows: (1) Review and explore the data, developing categories during the review process; (2) Develop descriptors for each category in order to code the data; (3) Report findings; and (4) Interpret findings. After reviewing all collected data from the questionnaires and interviews, the researcher identified recurring themes based on preliminary emergent insights.

Respondent and Participant Demographics

This study utilized a variety of participants from Medlock Community College, including current students, support staff employees, and administrative employees. In order to provide context to the study findings, it is important to describe the composition of the questionnaire respondents and interview participants. The following demographic data represents respondents and participants from Medlock. Demographic information affiliated with the questionnaire respondents from other institutions will be presented in Appendix G and discussed during the reporting of the second research question data.

Student Questionnaire Respondent Demographics

Of the 761 questionnaire respondents, ages ranged from 18 years old to 60 and older, with 65% representing the 18-29 age group. Seventy-five percent were female and 25% were male. The majority of respondents were evenly distributed in regards to the amount of time they have been enrolled at Medlock. Thirty-one percent reported that they have been a Medlock student for less than one year; 26% reported between one and two years; and 32% reported between two and four years. The final 11% reported that they have been students for longer than four years. The questionnaire also asked participants to self-report their approximate grade point average (GPA). While self-reported, 58% of respondents reported that their GPA was between 3.01 and 4.00 range.

The researcher would like to note that 761 respondents is equivalent to a 5% response rate. While that may appear to be low, the participant demographics are a fairly representative of the overall student demographics at Medlock. Medlock's student population is 56% female and 44% male. The average age is 26, and 57% of Medlock students are over the age of 21. 25.4% of respondents were African American; 32% of Medlock's overall student population is African American. 55% of respondents were

White; 45% of Medlock’s overall student population is White (Medlock Fast Facts, 2014). According to Dey (1997), “It may be that a survey that yields a very low response rate, say 10%, does a fairly good job of representing the population from which the sample was originally drawn. This would be the case if the 10% who responded to this survey were quite similar to the 90% who failed to respond.” The researcher found this to be the case, and thus determined that the 5% response rate was sufficient, even if not ideal, for the purposes of this study.

Support Staff Questionnaire Respondent Demographics

There were 41 support staff questionnaire respondents. Of these respondents, ages ranged from 18 years to 60 and older, with the largest percentage (39%) representing the 50-59 age group. Seventy-five percent were female and 25% were male. The majority of respondents (43%) have been employed in higher education between 10 and 20 years. A variety of positions and support staff functions were represented, as noted in Figure 1:

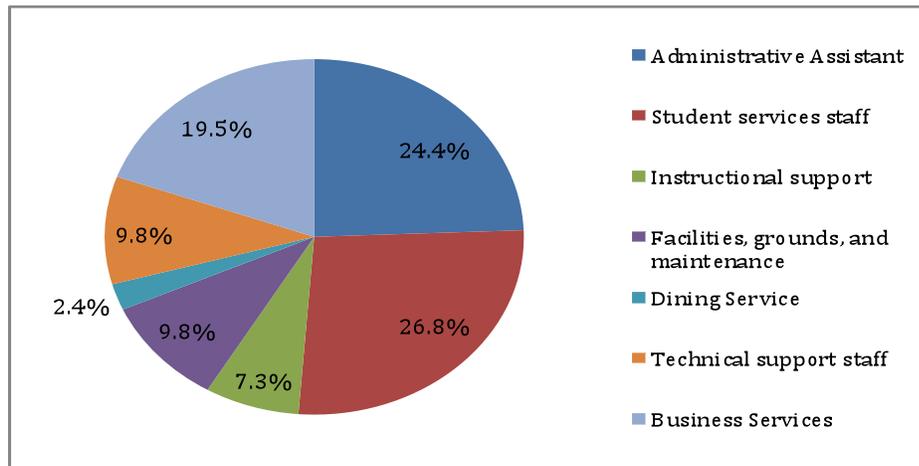


Figure 1. Medlock Support Staff Questionnaire Respondent Employee Classification

Support Staff Interview Participant Demographics

All 157 employees classified as support staff at Medlock were considered as potential interview participants. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) note, qualitative research emphasizes understanding of an event, phenomenon, group, or culture, and thus the researcher sought to identify participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation and who would yield fruitful, relevant information. Out of the six support staff interview participants, two were male and four were female. This male/female ratio is representative of the overall support staff demographics on campus. At the time of this study, two participants were classified as administrative assistants, one participant was employed in a business service office, one was classified as facilities, one was classified as instructional support, and one was classified as technical support staff. Participants' institutional longevity ranged from five years to over twenty years.

Administrative Interview Demographics

Six Medlock administrators participated in this research study, representing various departments and position levels. At the time of this study, Medlock only employed 43 administrators total, so the researcher will keep the descriptions brief in order to protect participant anonymity. Two of the six administrators were male, while four were female. Four of the six had been employed at Medlock for less than five years. One of the six had been employed for fifteen years, and one had been employed for seven years.

Findings: First Research Question

The first research question examined if a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction exists. Data relative to this first research question

indicates that all study participants, including current students, support staff, and administrators at Medlock Community College believe that support staff play a role in student success. Seventy-seven percent of student questionnaire respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that all college employees play a role in helping students learn and succeed. A subsequent question narrowed this idea further, and asked if *support staff* play an important role in helping students learn. With the focus placed specifically on the support staff employee group, the percentage of student respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed slightly increased to 80%. Support staff respondents answered the same two questions, with similar results. Eight-five percent of support staff felt that all college employee play a role in helping students learn and succeed, while 88% felt that support staff play a role in helping students.

A preliminary review of all questionnaire and interview data allowed the researcher to identify four themes related to the first question (see Appendix F). These themes represent the various ways in which support staff are perceived to play a role in student success, including retention, creating a positive community atmosphere, teachable moments, and providing students with access to resources.

Retention and Creating a Positive Community Atmosphere

The most common theme found throughout the questionnaire and interview responses was that support staff play a role in student success because they play a role in student retention. This theme was often tied to the idea that a positive atmosphere at the college can increase student retention. Each of the 12 interview participants described ways in which support staff interaction with students, or support staff functions in general, can impact retention in both positive and negative ways. Based on participant description, some of the positive ways that the support staff affects retention include

“being there” for the students, exhibiting a friendly, helpful attitude, and creating a clean, comfortable environment. As Jack indicated:

In order for a student to succeed, presumably that means that they need to be retained . . . The support staff can have a tremendous, positive influence. It could be that they [the student] bombs an exam and they come out of the room and the administrative assistant happens to be there and might be there just to say, ‘talk to me.’ So, it’s everybody from support staff to administration to everybody in between who plays a role in student success.

Both Kate and Claire made similar comments, with Kate indicating that by nature of the job title, support staff employees are there to “support student success all the way along.” She feels that the support staff title is not only indicative of the support that these employees give to other college employees, such as administrators and faculty, but to the students as well. This can include direct interaction with the students, such as when they need directions on campus or assistance on how to navigate the registration process, or it could be indirect, such as creating the schedule of classes in which the students register each semester. Kate further asserted that everything she does on a daily basis reaches the students at some point. Claire described days in which students who “are at critical mass” enter her office. Often, these students have an issue with their student record that is prohibiting them from registering, obtaining a grade, etc., or they are attempting to log a formal complaint about an issue with a course or instructor. Claire stated that the manner in which she interacts with and responds to these students either can help “talk them off of the ledge” or can cause them to lose faith in the institution and give up.

Exhibiting a positive attitude and creating a feeling of community is thought to be another way that support staff can increase student retention. When asked how she helps students succeed, Charlotte mentioned that she always tries “to make sure that the

students feel welcome. I tell them good luck with classes and have a nice semester. Those little things can give the student a positive attitude about the college and hopefully help them to succeed here.” James agreed with this idea, stating that the support staff employees within his department are “really the first people who are there to smile, and say, “I’m here to help you.”

Other interview participants described a connection between a student’s physical comfort level and student retention. Hugo described his job duties as:

Everything that has to do with the comfort level of the students, faculty, and staff occupying a building, from snow removal to heating and cooling. [sic] It’s more ‘behind the scenes work’ than someone in the Enrollment Office, but just as important. If these things are not attended to, the buildings would be uninhabitable and classes couldn’t run. That would definitely impact student learning and success, but it is something most people here take for granted.

Libby explained that from her position, she sees firsthand the effects of the work accomplished out of Hugo’s department. She notes that the environment does have an impact on the students’ abilities to learn, and could cause them to lose pride in the institution, which could affect retention:

I can see students’ responses as far as their comfort level in a classroom that is not well-prepared, with the roof leaking and so forth . . . [a student’s] impression of, and pride in, the institution . . . is definitely impacted by staff at every level The first impression can easily turn them off, and it can easily lay the foundation for issues to come up. It will impact how they view the ability to have their concerns addressed by the institution, or even their ability to seek additional assistance with their academic work. All of that affects the bigger picture of how you support student retention and student success.

Libby’s comments touch on the negative impact that support staff can have on student retention as well. This belief was most often tied to the concept of poor customer service. As an anonymous respondent from the support staff questionnaire commented, “customer

service is at the heart of everything we do . . . we should provide excellent customer service to make the experience of college positive for the student.” Taking that idea one step further, Jack believes that negative encounters with staff could be detrimental to student retention and success, especially given the high percentage of community college students who are considered at-risk:

We [community colleges] have a good percentage of students who never really had success at the secondary or even elementary school level . . . When you are trying to serve a group of people who have stumbled throughout their lives, any little bump in the road can push them off track. . . It could be simply coming to the front desk and that staff member having a bad attitude; it could be giving them the wrong directions on campus; it could be going to the restroom and it not being cleaned. Any employee at the college can impact a student at some point and if that impact is negative and at the wrong time, you could lose that student.

This idea that all employees can influence student retention, which in turn affects student success, was pervasive throughout the surveys and interviews.

Teachable Moments

Seven out of 12 interview participants (58%) indicated that support staff play a role in student success because they engage students in what were referred to by one participant as “teachable moments” that occur outside the classroom. Participants recognized that faculty are responsible for teaching course content, yet there are other forms of learning that occur in a community college. Teachable moments can occur at any time, and during any interaction between students and staff. Shannon believes that these moments occur right from a student’s initial contact with the college. As she explained, “support staff are responsible for helping students get off to a smooth start by educating them on policies and procedures.” For example, if a student has difficulty registering for classes using the online registration system, the support staff employees should not only ensure that the student gets registered, but should also teach the student

how to use the online system so that they can accomplish registration on their own the following semester. Kate also discussed this issue, stating, “Teaching the students how to navigate college procedures becomes especially important given how often we seem to change procedures around here.”

Rose explained that teachable moments could occur during a seemingly difficult interaction between students and staff as well. At times, students who are experiencing issues with registration, financial aid, or their classes can appear adversarial when engaging in conversation with the staff. From Rose’s perception, students exhibit this type of behavior because they are upset, or “because they might not have the proper ‘social tools’ skill set, like how to properly ask for things.” In addition to assisting students with their issues, the staff can take a moment to calmly explain to students how they could change their behavior in the future in order to have a more pleasant experience. This coaching could come in the form of teaching the correct procedures in order to avoid an issue in the future, or gently coaching students in regards to their social skills and the proper, non-confrontational manner in which to ask for assistance. In order for this to work, however, Rose indicated that the support staff need to “possess great conflict management skills so they can diffuse a situation and not contribute to it.” Claire also spoke about the importance of engaging in teachable moments with students, and also specified that the staff need to handle these situation delicately: “When you shame a student during a difficult encounter, it destroys any ability to correct their behavior and use that as a teachable moment.”

Providing Access to Resources

Medlock employees classified as support staff have a broad range of job titles and responsibilities, and so the amount of daily direct interaction with students varies

depending on the position. Out of the 41 support staff survey respondents, 15 (37%) reported that less than 25% of their job involves direct contact with students, whether in-person, on the phone, or via email. Thirteen respondents (32%) reported that 75% or more of their job involves direct contact with students. The remaining 13 fell in between 25% and 75%. However, in spite of the reported wide range of direct student contact, the support staff questionnaire revealed that the majority of employees perceive that their job supports student success. When asked if their particular role as a support staff employee is important in helping students learn and succeed, 33 out of the 41 respondents (80%) reported that they strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. One survey respondent commented that he/she “operates equipment critical to student, faculty, and visitor satisfaction with our facilities,” and therefore indirectly supports student success in ways that often go unrecognized by the college at large.

The concept of staff indirectly influencing student success was prevalent during the interviews as well. Ten out of the 12 interview participants (83%) indicated that providing students with access to resources was one way in which all support staff promote student success, regardless of job responsibilities. As a member of the Medlock informational technology department, Michael explained that “every piece of computer network equipment on campus” was installed by members of his department, and so “students cannot log into a computer, print a piece of paper, or access data on the college network without touching something we [the IT department] have put into place.” This seemingly behind-the-scenes work becomes especially important in light of the amount of teaching content that is presented in an online format, as Juliet noted. Charlotte agreed with this general idea, reporting that she often assists with processing orders for

classroom supplies or equipment. “Without those purchases, faculty would not have the supplies required to teach their classes.” She summarized this concept by indicating, “everything that support staff employees do is tied to the goal of making things better for the students, who are ultimately the reason why support staff are employed at the college.”

Findings: Second Research Question

The second research question sought to determine support staff employees’ own perceptions of their role in supporting student success. It also compared Medlock support staff perceptions to those of other Midwest institutions in order to determine if support staff perceptions of their role are different based on institution of employment. The researcher initially believed that questionnaire and survey data related to the role that support staff play in student success would differ among participant groups (students, support staff, and administrators). This was not found to be the case. As previously discussed, Medlock support staff employees overwhelmingly believe that they have a role in supporting student success. Their perception is that they play a role in student success by encouraging student retention, creating a positive community atmosphere, engaging the students in teachable moments, and providing students with access to resources. These perceptions were found to be similar to those that students and administrators have of the support staff role. For example, as one administrative interview participant emphatically stated, “My motto is that everyone is important, just in different ways. I tell my support staff members this every day so that they know how important they are.”

However, there was one perception of the support staff role that was unique to the support staff respondents. While support staff perceive that they function in ways that

support student success, they also perceive that *other* employee groups on campus do not share this positive perception. The idea that other employee groups look down upon the support staff pervaded the survey data and interview responses.

As one support staff survey respondent commented, “This opinion of support staff playing an important role on campus is unfortunately not shared by most faculty. Over 20 years of experience has demonstrated that the overall feeling of the faculty on this campus is one of pure disdain for support staff.” In a somewhat tempered version of the same idea, another survey respondent mentioned that the institutional leadership fails to recognize the role that support staff play. He/she said, “I’m not sure they really give it a lot of thought. The role of faculty in a student’s experience at the college seems to dominate.” During the interview process, Charlotte indicated that if she “could change anything [about working at Medlock], it would be to have support staff appreciated more by many on campus . . . a little appreciation would go a long way.” Survey respondents and interview participants pointed to institutional issues such as a lack of communication with support staff, lack of inclusion in the Medlock Core Team, and a lack of training opportunities offered to support staff as evidence to support their feelings of marginalization. In addition, when describing their own employee group, support staff used terms such as “second class citizens” and “the step-children of the college.” The researcher would like to note, however, that neither the student questionnaire nor the administrative interviews revealed any negative perceptions regarding the role that support staff play on campus. On the contrary, both students and administrators rated this employee group highly and recognized the importance of their contributions.

Support Staff Perceptions at Other Institutions

In addition to surveying support staff members at Medlock, the researcher surveyed support staff from three additional Midwest community colleges. The survey questions were identical to the questions asked of the Medlock staff in order to determine whether the support staff across varying Midwest institutions share similar perceptions of their roles in student success as compared to Medlock Community College. The researcher was interested in examining this comparison in order to determine if institutional culture, size, or employee demographics affect support staff perceptions of their role on campus.

Institution A Findings

Institution A is smaller than Medlock, with 78 total support staff. All 78 staff members were sent the questionnaire, and there were 28 questionnaire respondents for a response rate of 36%. (See Appendix G.) The Institution A support staff survey revealed many of the same themes as the Medlock survey. The importance of all staff roles was keenly noted by respondents; 96% reported that they either agree or strongly agree with the statement, “Every college employee plays a role in helping students learn and succeed, no matter what their job is.” The percentage increased to 100% when asked if *support staff* play a role in helping students learn and succeed. Comments that support this theme include:

- “We are usually the front-line person a student comes in contact with; the first impression we give can make or break their educational career.”
- “If a student needs help or they are in distress about a class or a personal issue, they are naturally going to talk to the person that is most available, which is most often a support staff person.”

- “A student could get their [sic] inspiration to succeed from anybody on campus, not just an instructor.”
- “We not only ‘assist’ the student wherever we can, but encourage them along the way.”

These comments support the idea noted in both the Medlock questionnaire and interviews that support staff play a role in student success by assisting in student retention efforts.

It is interesting to note that several Institution A questionnaire respondents felt that they play a crucial role in supporting student success but also perceived that they are a marginalized group on campus. This theme was prevalent amongst Medlock support staff, although Institution A respondents were more divided on the issue. When asked if the institutional leadership understands the importance of support staff in helping students succeed, 22% of Institution A respondents disagreed, 22% were neutral, 30% agreed, and 26% strongly agreed. It appears that any type of perceived marginalization was felt by certain employees but not others. Survey comments suggested that the perception of marginalization stems from a lack of communication with support staff employees. As one respondent commented, “While I believe that some of our leadership understands how much we assist students and help them succeed, there are many who do not keep us informed of institutional changes which makes it difficult to do our jobs effectively.” Another respondent indicated that “the supervision is not always good at sharing information,” while another mentioned that “information pertinent to students is not always shared with all the departments and can handicap us in our efforts.” While a lack of communication was one of several reasons that Medlock support staff feel marginalized, it was the only reported reason from Institution A respondents.

Institution B Findings

Institution B is similar in size to Medlock, with 145 total support staff. All 145 staff members were sent the questionnaire, and there were 55 questionnaire respondents for a response rate of 38%. (See Appendix G.) Support staff at Institution B also believe that every college employee impacts student learning and success. Eighty-nine percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Every college employee plays a role in helping students learn and succeed, no matter what their job.” The percentage who agreed or strongly agreed increased to 93% when specifically asked if support staff play an important role in helping students learn and succeed. Comments supporting this theme include:

- “While some positions play a much larger or more direct role in helping students learn and succeed, all positions can have an impact simply by making life easier [for students] and taking care of the little things.”
- “I believe staff, faculty, and administration have to work together in making sure student needs are met. Like the saying goes, it takes a village.”
- Support staff are the first impression or the last resort. Both matter.
- Teachers teach. Administration guides the ship along her course. Support staff perform the day-to-day work of keeping the ship running smoothly and keeping the students’ heads above water when life knocks them overboard.”

While both Medlock and Institution A respondents reported a feelings of marginalization stemming from other employees within the institution, these feelings were not widely reported from Institution B respondents. When asked if the institutional leadership at Institution B understands the importance of the role of support staff in helping students learn and succeed, 62% agreed or strongly agreed, while 27% were neutral. Survey comments did not offer many additional or clarifying thoughts. One respondent

commented that “the leadership at the college does not understand the *amount* of staff necessary to help students (emphasis added).” Another mentioned that changes in processes are not always communicated to support staff, but overall there were no strong feelings of marginalization reported from this institution.

Institution C Findings

Institution C was the largest institution to participate in the support staff survey with 182 total support staff, but had the smallest number of participants. All 182 staff members were sent the questionnaire, and there were 20 questionnaire respondents for a response rate of 11%. (See Appendix G.) Support staff participants at Institution C overwhelmingly believe that every college employee impacts student learning. Ninety-five percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Every college employee plays a role in helping students learn and succeed, no matter what their job.” The percentage that agreed or strongly agreed increased to 100% when specifically asked if support staff play an important role in helping students learn and succeed. Comments regarding this topic include:

- “It is all of our job to make sure the students are okay.”
- “I think that personal connection cannot be underestimated. Support staff offer this.”
- “Totally agree, even if it's just being a friendly face and directing them to any resources they may need.”

Similar to Institution B, Institution C participants did not report any strong feelings of marginalization. When asked if the institutional leadership understands the importance of support staff in helping students learn and succeed, 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Comments to this question include: “I feel that the leadership does

appreciate the importance of support staff,” and “My supervisor is very appreciative of my work and understands the importance of my role.”

Findings: Third Research Question

What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success? The majority of data related to this research question was gathered from interviews with Medlock support staff and administrators. The interviews revealed a wide variety of skills that employees believe are critical for support staff to possess, which the researcher sorted into eight major themes. Table 6 shows the themes and the number of interview respondents who discussed the importance of that particular theme during their interview.

Table 6. Knowledge, Skill, and Ability Themes Derived from Employee Interviews

KNOWLEDGE, SKILL, AND ABILITY THEMES	NUMBER OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS WHO
Customer Service	8 (67%)
Knowledge of Institution	8 (67%)
Communication Skills	7 (58%)
Desire to Learn	7 (58%)
Positive Attitude	5 (42%)
Sense of Ownership	5 (42%)
Technical Skills	4 (33%)
Sense of Professionalism	3 (25%)

Customer service skills and knowledge of the institution were reported as the most important knowledge, skills, or abilities (KSAs) for a support staff member to possess if they are to help create an institutional environment focused on student success. Both were ranked equally high in importance, but interviewees often named customer service first when asked to describe skills that are essential for support staff to possess. The researcher did note, however, that the concept of customer service has a different connotation for different people. James asserted that customer service centers on the

ability to exhibit a positive, encouraging, and friendly attitude when working with others. He stated, “We just need to be happy, proud people . . . Proud to the point where we love what we do, we love who we serve, we serve everybody, and we really just want to be the best person who can help as much as we can.” In contrast, Libby explained that the concept is much more widespread than just exhibiting a friendly attitude. She described customer service as “a sense of being of service to others, including timeliness to work and being ready to serve customers the moment your shift begins.” It also includes greeting skills, understanding how to work with different personality types, and remaining composed when working with a customer, regardless of the situation. Jack described customer service in a similar manner as Libby, but also mentioned that providing excellent customer service is the community college’s way of creating a sense of community on campus. Four-year institutions are able to create a sense of community and inclusiveness because many students live on campus and students are actively involved in campus life. Most community colleges do not offer this option, and so according to Jack, providing excellent customer service is one way that community colleges can foster inclusiveness and make students feel welcome, which in turn aids in retention.

The majority of interview participants recognized customer service as the most important skill for a support staff employee to possess, but some participants also indicated that measuring an employee’s ability to provide customer service is problematic because there are multiple perceptions of what constitutes good service. As Ana explained, “people can perceive that they are providing good customer service when they are not . . . Their perception of ‘good’ can be that they simply answer the student’s

questions, whether in a friendly manner or not.” Other people may believe that providing good customer service indicates that the employee exceeds the customer’s expectations, answers all questions, exhibits a positive attitude, etc. Rose also mentioned the difficulty of explaining customer service expectations to staff members. She asked, “What is great customer service? Is it just doing your job, or is it going above and beyond?” The lack of parameters means that it is difficult to give accolades or reprimands for providing or not providing good service.

Knowledge of the institution was ranked equally high in importance as customer service skills. This includes basic knowledge of the campus layout, of college policies and procedures, of college programs, and of the functions of various departments.

Possessing knowledge of the institution as a whole allows support staff members to assist students effectively and refer them to other areas if need be, while avoiding the “runaround” that many interview participants noted as an issue on Medlock’s campus.

For example, Hugo said, “When a student stops to ask you a question on campus, you can see it in their face that they have been given the runaround, which is completely unacceptable.” When prompted to describe the term “runaround,” Hugo clarified that he was referring to instances when a student requests assistance from an employee and that employee either A) does not know where to refer the student, or B) refers them to the incorrect location, resulting in the student walking across campus multiple times in order to resolve their issue. Charlotte also discussed this idea, but said that at times staff members simply do not know how to assist the students through no fault of their own. She reported, “The one thing I hate the most is not being able to answer a student question and not knowing who to refer them to, or even knowing who to call for the

answer.” She explained that this occurs because there is a lack of communication between campus departments at Medlock, especially when policies or procedures change, and that it causes her to feel ineffective in her job duties.

Other knowledge, skills, and abilities described as important for support staff to possess include communication skills and a desire to learn. At times, the concept of communication skills was conflated with the idea of customer service during the interviews, but some participants, such as Libby, made the distinction that communication skills involve being able to communicate effectively with internal constituents as well as external. While communication with internal employees could be seen as separate from assisting the external customers/students, a support staff survey respondent commented that these ideas are actually intertwined because staff members need to “work as one consistent, cohesive group, providing the same information college-wide.” Another survey respondent explained that all staff members “need to be on the same page, singing the same song from the same book.” In order for support staff to effectively assist students, employees from various departments need to be able to communicate with each other in order to ensure that students are provided with consistent messages and information from all college employees.

The notion that support staff members must possess a desire to learn connects to the fourth research question regarding professional development, but also reveals an underlying belief held by many Medlock employees about the importance of perpetuating the community college mission, or “perpetuating the community college product,” as Libby explained. Part of the community college mission is to instill an attitude of life-long learning in the students, so Libby asserted that all staff members should set an

example for students to emulate. As James explained, “Community colleges are a community of learners. Everybody inside the institution as well as those coming in should be learning. We all teach and learn from each other.” Ana ranked a desire to learn as the most important characteristic for a staff member to possess, simply stating that, “Any required knowledge or skills can be taught to someone who wants to learn.” This includes the other highly ranked KSAs, such as customer service, knowledge of the institution, and communication skills.

Findings: Fourth Research Question

The fourth research question sought to determine what types of professional development programs would enhance the skills required for support staff to actively participate in helping students learn and succeed. The Medlock surveys and interviews revealed the overall belief that professional development is essential for this employee group, but also the sense that there is a lack of professional development offered at the time of this study. The researcher initiated discussion of this topic by asking what types of professional development programs were currently available to support staff employees at Medlock. The responses indicated that professional development is based on two primary modes of delivery: college courses offered to support staff through a tuition waiver, and what respondents described as the “underground network” of assistance.

When asked about the available professional development offerings at the college, 42% of interview respondents listed “free college courses” as their first response. As Michael indicated, “All full-time employees at Medlock are able to take college courses free of charge using a tuition waiver that is part of the employee benefits package.” As

Hugo reminded the researcher, this includes “the entire college catalog, for free! Courses in all types of subjects!” However, both Hugo and Michael felt that not enough support staff employees take advantage of the opportunity to earn college credits through the tuition waiver, possibly because the classes must be taken outside of normal work hours, which for some can go against the traditional idea of work-related professional development programs.

Sixty-seven percent of interview participants suggested that an informal “underground network” of support is the other type of “professional development” occurring at Medlock. Claire indicated that traditional professional development offerings are not widely available, and so, “Support staff employees turn to the underground network. We connect with employees from other departments and hopefully they can tell us what we need to know about their area.” However, Claire also explained that there are flaws to the underground network method. For example, she mentioned, “Information is hard to come by. If you upset someone from another department, even unintentionally, then that person might not help you when you need it. I try to never burn any bridges, because you never know when you will need someone’s help in the future.” Juliet agreed that the informal/underground network was how she obtained most of her training. She explained, “How you find information is by going out to lunch with other employees, talking to people, or calling other departments. You have to trust that the other people are giving you the correct information though, which isn’t always the case and sometimes makes this training method ineffective.”

Given the lack of professional development offerings available for support staff, the researcher asked participants what types of programs would be beneficial to staff,

especially considering the four skills identified as the most important for support staff to possess (knowledge of the institution, customer service, communication skills, and a desire to learn). Participants had a number of suggestions for professional development opportunities that would enhance these skills.

In order to develop knowledge of the institution, Jack offered the suggestion of creating a program that would give employees first-hand experience of the processes that students must undergo each semester. As he described, “It would be helpful for everybody to step through the process of being a student. What do you have to do to enroll? What do you do on day one? What do you do on day 10? That way you can help the student and understand the process from the perspective of the user.” This type of program would be interactive, and allow employees to visit the enrollment services area as students, walk through the admissions and enrollment process, speak with an advisor, obtain a schedule, and locate their classes on campus.

Kate spoke of an overall orientation program for employees, noting that she “wished there was something like that when [she] first hired in, because it was a struggle.” She described each department on campus as “little islands,” and noted that it would be helpful for new employees to understand the “big picture” of the college, such as what types of programs and services are offered, as well as the details, such as college policy and procedures. Charlotte agreed that this would be helpful, especially for new employees. She said, “I would hate to be a new employee [at Medlock] now because they do not have an orientation at all. They may get some assistance from the area they work in but campus-wide information, in my opinion, does not happen.” While several interview participants did note a lack of college orientation for new employees, it was

reported to the researcher that one department on campus had created their own orientation. Rose explained that within her department, a training guide was developed because the area managers “grew tired of not having anything, and waiting for the college to create a new-hire training program.” When asked to describe the components of the training guide, Rose said:

It’s a document that explains things from the beginning and answers questions like: What is a community college? What is Medlock Community College? What are our values? Providing answers to these questions helps all staff understand the college first, before anything else. Understand our mission, why we exist, what we are here to do, and how our students are unique from other institutions . . . Then we go through things within our immediate department, like policies and procedures.

Rose noted that other departments on campus have seen the model from her department and are attempting to develop a similar training guide for their areas. However, she also believed that it would be beneficial for the college to create one standard program so that new employees from all areas could obtain the same basic knowledge base.

Apart from programs aimed strictly at institutional knowledge, many study participants also felt that customer service training programs would be beneficial to staff, and described customer service as the standard type of professional development program that one would offer to employees in support staff positions. When asked what a customer service program would entail, responses included communication and greeting skills (Libby), dealing with difficult customers (Jack and Rose), and exhibiting a friendly, welcoming attitude (James). Rose also explained that a customer service program would ideally be scenario based, so that participants could work on their empathy skills. These skills are critical, because as she explained:

We have students present in front of us in our department who have very difficult circumstances and lives. They could come in to discuss their grades but during the conversation inform you that they are homeless, or don't have money for food. In those cases, support staff need to be empathetic and go the extra mile. Help them with their grade issue, but also take the time to connect them with resources. Listening and being empathetic is huge in our line of work.

In addition to offering scenario-based customer service training, both Claire and Ana mentioned the importance of having support staff train each other in the customer service area. As Claire indicated, "Top down training doesn't always work. It can be insulting. If support staff can train each other based on real-life situations that actually happened, it would be beneficial but also might be better received." Ana agreed with this idea, and further stated that this "empowers the staff so that they feel like they are contributing to the training process" as opposed to passively absorbing information.

During discussions of current and desired professional development programs, participants mentioned several barriers that they felt could hinder initiatives to offer more training for support staff. The main concern appears to relate to scheduling issues. As Shannon stated, "Medlock is a lean organization in terms of staff. The little staff that we have need to be *doing* while they are at work and not *training*. It is unfortunate to say, but there isn't always time for that." Ana felt similarly, explaining, "Staff don't really have any free time. Having training, no matter how valuable, is not viable or feasible."

Overall, 33% of interview participants felt that lack of time was a large impediment to training support staff. However, Libby offered a counterpoint to the statements regarding a lack of time:

I believe in continuous improvement, and so I have to put my money where my mouth is in regards to staff training. Yes, this means that there will be some people out of the office and in training, but I have to make that concession if I want my staff to continuously improve. We may have a day or two of

'bumpiness' in the office, but I have to make that investment. It is important not only from an operational efficiency standpoint, but also from a morale standpoint.

Another issue mentioned by several participants is a lack of staff desire to attend training from some staff members. Hugo identified this as discrepant behavior when he stated, "Support staff want to be treated as equals and have opportunities that are available to other employees, and yet they tend to stay in their comfort zone and don't take advantage of the opportunities that are offered, such as the free tuition." Claire referred to this phenomenon as the "old school secretary mentality." As she explained, "The days when you come into work and fetch coffee, type memos, and file paperwork don't exist anymore. As a support staff member, if you want to be treated as an equal on campus, you need to be prepared to learn new skills, think critically, and be a free thinker." Kate agreed with these sentiments, but pointed out that not everyone feels this way. She estimated that 50% of the current support staff are ready and willing to make strides in the professional development area, and would like the opportunity to learn new skills.

General Findings

The researcher identified findings specific to each research question, but also identified general findings and significant themes from the collected data as a whole.

Three significant themes emerged from the research:

1. All community college employees play a role in helping students learn and succeed in their educational goals.
2. Support staff employees perceive that they are the least respected employee group on campus, and believe that others see them as the least important.
3. Professional development is important for all employees, but colleges lack professional development offerings for support staff.

First Significant Theme: Importance of all Staff Roles

The first significant theme revealed by both the questionnaires and the interviews is the importance of all employees in helping students learn and succeed in their educational goals. Seventy-seven percent of student questionnaire respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that all college employees play a role in helping students learn and succeed. A subsequent question narrowed this idea further, and asked if *support staff* play an important role in helping students learn. With the focus placed specifically on the support staff employee group, the percentage of student respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed slightly increased to 80%. Support staff respondents answered the same two questions, with similar results. Eight-five percent of support staff felt that all college employee play a role in helping students learn and succeed, while 88% felt that support staff play a role in helping students. One support staff respondent commented that, “as a team working toward the common goal of providing the best institutional-wide educational experience, it is everyone’s role to play a part!” Interview responses such as “any employee at the college can impact a student at some point and if that impact is negative and at the wrong time, you could lose that student, which impacts learning” (Jack), and “everyone is important, just in different ways” (Rose) demonstrate this belief among the administrative participants as well.

Second Significant Theme: Perceived Marginalization of Support Staff

While the majority of student, support staff, and administrative participants indicated that all employees play an important role in assisting students on campus, the second significant theme reflects a belief held by the Medlock support staff that *others* see them as the *least* important employee group on campus. Anonymous support staff survey comments include:

- “I don’t believe the leadership values the importance of support staff.”
- “Our opinions are not considered worthy.”
- “The support staff at MCC are not considered to be part of the Core Team, so it is not deemed important or necessary to work with or communicate with us.”

This theme was prevalent in the interviews as well, with both the support staff and administrative participants noting this perception that support staff have. Eighty-three percent of support staff survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their specific role as a support staff employee is important in helping students learn and succeed, yet only 53% agreed or strongly agreed that the institutional leadership believed that support staff are important in helping students learn and succeed. The researcher was unable to discern whether this perception of marginalization/lack of importance was created over time or if support staff employees have this perception from the beginning of their employment, as this differed between participants.

Third Significant Theme: Professional Development Needs

When asked about professional development offerings for support staff, study participants overwhelmingly noted the importance of providing professional development for all staff members, but also indicated that there were not enough professional development offerings available for support staff. One hundred percent of interview participants cited a lack of professional development offerings available to support staff as the largest issue with professional development programs at Medlock. Anonymous survey respondent comments also supported this idea:

- “Any professional development for my job is done on my own time and at my own expense. I’ve asked to attend things, but there never seems to be money available for support staff.”

- “I can count on one hand the number of professional development opportunities that have been offered to me in my 17 years of employment at Medlock.”
- “Support staff are the first to be blamed and the last to be trained.”

Important topics for support staff professional development programs include institutional orientation and customer service training. It was noted that in order for these programs to have the most impact, they should be interactive, scenario-based, and offered in peer-training formats, where support staff would have an opportunity to train each other. However, study participants also revealed that not all support staff employees are willing to participate in professional development offerings, despite requests for equality on campus in this area.

Summary

The data presented in this chapter was collected from a 761 student participants, 144 support staff survey participants, and 12 interview participants for a total of 917 study participants. Following a methodical process of coding and analyzing the data allowed the researcher to organize the information into an Excel workbook that reflected the themes and relationships among the data, as presented in this chapter. Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the importance of the data themes presented, implications for other community colleges, and recommendations for further research and action.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore the role community college support staff play in student success initiatives from the perspectives of students, support staff, and administrators at a Midwest community college. In a time when colleges are being held to higher levels of accountability for student success and completion, many institutions are beginning to reexamine the traditional education models that have been followed for decades and implementing new practices focused on increasing student achievement. A wealth of information exists in the literature on the roles and importance of various employee groups in implementing these new ideas and best practices, as well as professional development/training that will ready employees for the task. However, much of that information is focused specifically on faculty, college leadership, and student services staff. One employee group appears to be left out, the support staff group. Little information exists that considers the role that frontline and support staff play in encouraging student success, and few professional development opportunities are available to this group to enhance their skills in working with students. The researcher wishes to address this gap in the literature, and believes that a better understanding of this issue will allow college support staff the opportunity and appropriate training to assist students in achieving their educational goals.

The researcher conducted this study at multiple Midwest community colleges using a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Data collection consisted of surveys of support staff, employees and current students, as well as in-depth interviews of support staff and administrators. This approach allowed the researcher to incorporate the findings from both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of the research questions. In seeking to understand this topic, the study addressed the following questions: (1) Is there a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction? (2) Do support staff employees perceive that they have a role in supporting student success? What is that perception, and how does it compare to support staff perceptions at other institutions? (3) What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success? (4) What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required support staff skills?

Interpretations of the Findings

The previous chapter presented the findings from the four research questions. Analysis of these findings allowed the researcher to draw several conclusions and recommendations for further action and research. The following is a discussion of these conclusions based on the findings from each research question, also taking into account the literature reviewed during Chapter 2 of this study.

First Research Question: Conclusions

The first research question broadly examined if a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction exists. Data relative to this first research

question indicates that all study participants, including current students, support staff, and administrators at Medlock Community College believe that there is a correlation. The data collection process allowed study participants to describe the ways in which they feel that support staff contribute to the institution's goal of student success, with interesting results. The role of support staff in student success was traced to four primary themes, including student retention, creating a positive community atmosphere, engaging students in teachable moments outside of the classroom, and providing students with access to resources. All participants were cognizant that the support staff role in helping students is not the same as that of faculty or administrators, but they recognized that interconnectedness exists between all employee groups at the institution. For example, without support staff to assist students with the admissions and enrollment processes, the faculty would not have students to teach. Without faculty to teach, students would not enroll in the college and the staff would have no one to serve. While the research question was focused specifically on the correlation between support staff and student success, the findings point to a larger understanding of the importance of all employee groups on campus. Participants began discussing ways in which the support staff play a role, which led to discussions of the college as a whole. The researcher concludes that Medlock employees recognize the institution as a machine comprised of multiple moving parts, with each part essential to serving students. If one part fails to function, the other parts subsequently begin to break down as well and the students ultimately suffer.

This notion of interconnectedness is consistent with frameworks or theories that institutions are currently using in order to place more focus on student success, especially Learning College theory in which all college employees share the responsibility for

student recruitment, retention, and ultimate success. In his many works describing the Learning College concept, O'Banion refers to all employees working within an institution as "learning facilitators." He does not believe that the title should be exclusive to faculty and administrators. Although faculty, administrators, and support staff all have different roles within the college, as learning facilitators these groups have one key element in common – learning facilitators define their roles and their work in response to the needs of the learners (O'Banion, 2006). Following this model, every staff member is inextricably linked to the students, and should consider how their work affects a student's ability to learn, as well as how they can better meet the needs of the student population by creating an environment that supports student success. While Medlock Community College does not identify itself as a Learning College, some Learning College concepts are prevalent in the thinking and attitudes of the staff at Medlock without the formal label.

Second Research Question: Conclusions

The second research question sought to determine Medlock support staff employees' own perceptions of their role in supporting student success. It also compared Medlock support staff perceptions to those of other Midwest institutions in order to determine if support staff perceive their roles differently based on institution of employment. The findings from this research question suggest that Medlock support staff firmly believe that they play an important role in student success, and yet they perceive that the faculty and administration hold an opposing view of their group. Support staff believe that the faculty and administration comprise the dominant culture within the institution, evidenced by the college governing structure, a lack of communication with support staff, and a lack of opportunity for professional development and advancement

within the institution. This belief links to ideas about organizational culture posited by Lumby (2012) and described in Chapter 2, in which Lumby states that staff at educational institutions create distinct subcultures within the institution as opposed to participating in the dominant culture. Medlock support staff exemplify this notion of comprising a distinct subculture, though they view the support staff subculture as something created or imposed upon them by other employee groups as opposed to a subculture that they consciously chose to create.

The researcher compared these perceptions to those of support staff from three other Midwest institutions, referred to within this study as Institution A, Institution B, and Institution C. Support staff from Institution A reported similar feelings of marginalization and also cited a lack of communication with support staff in regards to institutional policies, procedures, and initiatives as rationale. In contrast, participants from Institutions B and C did not report any strong feelings of marginalization nor did they report a lack of communication with the support staff group.

A conclusion drawn from these findings is that support staff seek recognition and equality, but equality is based on inclusion, opportunities for involvement, and communication as opposed to rank, pay, or even verbal validation. Throughout this study, other study participants (students and administrators) spoke highly of the role of support staff and recognized their important contributions to student success, yet the support staff still reported feelings of marginalization. The researcher thus concludes that support staff are seeking action from the institution as opposed to words. Telling support staff that they have a critical role in helping students is important, but support staff do not seem to ascribe meaning to the words alone. Inclusion in campus communication and initiatives is

more meaningful from their perspective, two items that support staff currently find lacking.

Third Research Question: Conclusions

The third research question identified the required knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) for support staff in order for them to effectively play a role in fostering student success. Customer service skills and knowledge of the institution were reported as the most important KSAs for a support staff member to possess. These two areas were ranked equally high in importance overall, yet customer service was the first response provided by most study participants which suggests that many find this skill to outrank any others. However, careful consideration of participant comments related to both these skill categories reveals a relationship or chain in which knowledge of the institution actually forms the foundation. Customer service links to that foundation, which subsequently links to the campus environment, student retention, and student success, as depicted in Figure 2.

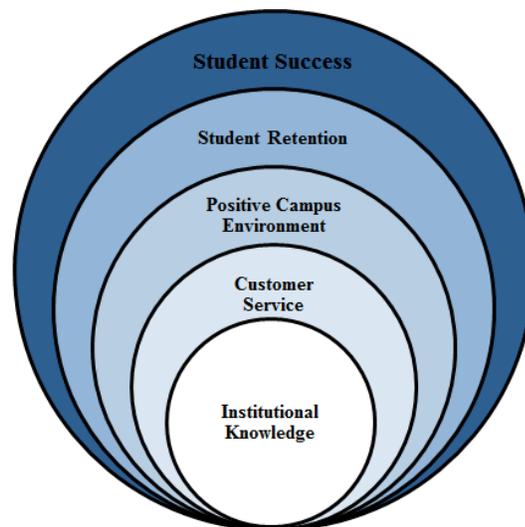


Figure 2. Relationship Between Support Staff KSAs and Student Success

Knowledge of the institution forms the foundation of the relationship, because even support staff employees with excellent customer service skills cannot effectively assist students if they do not possess knowledge of institutional policies, procedures, and program offerings. As Juliet noted during her interview, “There are times when a student reaches me and says, ‘I’ve been talking to five people and nobody knows the answer.’ At that point, it does not necessarily matter if those five people were friendly. The student still has not been helped with their issue.” As such, knowledge of the institution is essential to effectively serving students. A support staff employee who possesses this knowledge can then assist students in a manner that is customer-focused. Providing excellent customer service helps create a positive campus environment for students and ties in to Tinto’s model of student retention that seeks to explain ways in which student interactions with the academic and social systems of the college can lead to student persistence or attrition (1975). Tinto believes that student success or failure does not lie solely in the hands of the students; institutions are equally responsible for creating settings that encourage success (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). The researcher thus concludes that support staff can help foster a setting that encourages student success by possessing institutional knowledge and customer service skills.

However, the researcher also found that the definition of customer service skills varies between employees, which indicates that it is problematic for institutions to measure this skill. Some study participants believe that good customer service is equivalent to staff being able to answer student questions or serve students in accordance with their job description. Others believe that a positive attitude is the driving force, and for others empathy is imperative. Some explained that customer service was “going

above and beyond” when serving a student. The researcher concludes that a spectrum of what constitutes good customer service exists, with simply performing duties in accordance with one’s job description on one end, and going far above one’s job description on the other. The existence of this spectrum indicates that institutions must create a shared understanding of what customer service means before emphasizing the importance of this skill to support staff. This is especially important if employees are to be judged based on their customer service skills, i.e. given accolades or reprimands.

Fourth Research Question: Conclusions

The fourth research question explored the types of professional development programs in existence at Medlock and programs that would enhance support staff skills, specifically those skills identified as important in the third research question. The Medlock surveys and interviews revealed the overall belief that professional development is essential for this employee group, but also the sense that there is a lack of professional development offered at the time of this study. Support staff participants especially expressed an interest and desire to participate in professional development programs, and appeared disappointed in the lack of current offerings. It was found that current professional development at Medlock is based on two primary modes of delivery: college courses offered to support staff through a tuition waiver, and what respondents described as the “underground network” of assistance, i.e. support staff seeking help from other employees. Some participants noted sporadic software training sessions (Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint) offered to support staff, but others were unaware of these sessions.

Given that support staff expressed an interest in participating in professional development programs and are offered the opportunity to take any college classes tuition-free, the researcher asked participants if the support staff took advantage of this

opportunity. The responses suggested that few support staff choose to engage in formal college coursework because courses must be completed during staff members' own time. In addition, it was reported that there are few support staff positions at Medlock that require an associate's degree. This leads the researcher to two conclusions: (1) Support staff believe that professional development is training that occurs during work hours as opposed to on their own time, and (2) Support staff do not see a clear connection between a college degree and professional development/job training, an issue that is perpetuated by the institution. In order for support staff to make this connection, the researcher believes that the institution would need to require an associate's degree for all support staff members. The lack of education requirements for support staff is especially interesting in light of the fact that Medlock offers associate degree programs in areas that are directly applicable to support staff positions, such as administrative assistants, customer service professionals, and computer technicians (as do many other community colleges). By failing to require support staff to possess degrees similar to those offered by the institution, it appears that the institution is devaluing their own programs, to both students and staff members.

Looking ahead to future needs, the researcher also explored the types of professional development programs that employees would want to see within the institution and that would enhance support staff skills. Several suggestions arose, including a comprehensive institutional orientation program, a scenario-based customer service program, and a scenario-based program where the staff would step through the admissions and enrollment procedures from the perspective of a student. When these ideas were proposed/discussed, participants appeared to understand the need for

professional development programs for support staff, and want the institution to create more opportunities for this group. However, administrative participants in this study also raised concerns about the feasibility of offering training to support staff, specifically in regards to the time that it would take. If an employee participated in training during work hours, the department or supervisor would need to find another employee to cover the workload during those hours. A number of people did not feel that Medlock has a large enough staff to be able to do this.

The findings from this research question were problematic to interpret. In one sense, participants desire professional development programs for support staff employees and understand that training has the potential to increase support staff skills, which in turn allows them to be more effective in their positions. However, from a support staff perspective, these programs would have to be offered during work hours in order to be perceived as work-related professional development in a manner that is equivalent to professional development/training programs offered to faculty and administrators during work hours. This is a natural and understandable perspective for staff to have, given that other employee groups are allowed/encouraged to attend training and conferences during the workday. As the findings from the second research question revealed, support staff seek treatment that is equivalent to other employee groups on campus. From an administrative perspective, however, allowing staff to attend training during work hours is not always feasible because there is not enough staff to cover the workload while other staff attends training. This could lead to some supervisors allowing staff to attend training while others choose to keep their staff focused on day-to-day operations and not attend training, creating another type of inequity on campus. Based on these findings, the

researcher concludes that in order for the institution to implement an effective professional development program, offerings would either need to be flexible, i.e. offered in an online format that staff could engage in as time permits, or the institution would need to emphasize the importance institution-wide and require staff to attend professional development, regardless of staff coverage.

Recommendations for Action

The researcher offers the following recommendations to community colleges based on the findings, analysis, and conclusions of this study: (a) Create a comprehensive communication plan that engages all college stakeholders; (b) Allow and encourage support staff to participate on committees and cross-functional teams; and (c) Increase the amount of professional development offerings available to support staff.

This study demonstrated the manner in which support staff interaction with students has the ability to affect student retention and student success. It also revealed a tendency for community colleges to fail to formally recognize the contributions from this employee group and thus remove the group from consideration when undertaking student success initiatives, creating professional development programs to enhance employee skills, or even communicating college policies and procedures. However, support staff often comprises the largest employee group at the institution, and these employees are often the first people that students encounter on campus. These frontline/support staff members are instrumental in creating a student's initial impression of the institution, as well as assisting students throughout their educational careers. The support staff participants in this study revealed a thorough understanding of how their role affects students, and a strong desire to help students achieve their educational goals. As such, it

is imperative for community colleges to recognize the role that support staff play and allow support staff the opportunity to participate in and lend their expertise to student success initiatives on campus.

One way that institutions can recognize and include the support staff is by creating a comprehensive communication plan that engages all college stakeholders. Study participants noted that a lack of communication regarding institutional initiatives, policies, and procedures leaves the support staff feeling marginalized and places them in a position to be ineffective in assisting students or performing their daily tasks. Including the support staff in college communications serves multiple purposes. First, the more information the employees have about the organization, their colleagues, and the decision-making process, the more they will feel they are integral part of the operation (Covey, 2012). Employees who feel that they are important to the organization will be happier, more productive, and more effective in their jobs, which in turn, often means that they will provide better service to students. Second, maintaining open dialogue with all employees means that no one will feel “blindsided” by decisions. Communication and transparency allows employees to feel connected to the organization’s leadership, to other employee groups, and to the organization’s overall mission (Atkins, 2012).

Communicating with support staff is one way that institutions can promote inclusiveness, but it is also important for institutions to remember that communication is a two-way street. Allowing and encouraging support staff to communicate their thoughts, opinions, and expertise is another way in which institutions can promote inclusiveness. This can be accomplished by allowing support staff to participate on college committees or participate in cross-functional teams. This group is an often-untapped resource on

campus. As discussed throughout this study, support staff interaction with students differs from the interaction that students have with faculty or administrators. Rather than viewing this difference as a reason to exclude support staff from committees, teams, or meetings, the college should recognize that this is even more reason to include the support staff. Their different view and knowledge of the student experience has the ability to add a richness and depth to discussions, and the institution would benefit greatly from giving the support staff a voice and including their perspective.

Shifting to an educational environment where every department and employee focuses on student success requires all employees to function at peak performance and understand how their role supports students. In order for employees to function at peak performance, they must have ample access to ongoing professional development opportunities. While the support staff participants in this study demonstrated an understanding of their role and importance in helping students, they also understood that participating in professional development programs would allow them to enhance their skills and have an even greater impact. The researcher recommends a significant increase in the amount of professional development programs available to support staff, and believes that creating training programs specifically for this employee group would be beneficial. Without proper professional development and training opportunities, support staff cannot be fully engaged in creating an environment that supports student success and the students become the group that ultimately suffers (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011).

In order for professional development programs to be effective, however, staff must participate. Given the apprehensions revealed during this study in regards to having staff take time away from their daily responsibilities and engage in training, it is further

recommended that professional development programs be offered in multiple formats, including online. The researcher believes that these recommendations for action will have a positive impact on the institution and the support staff group, which in turn will positively impact students.

Recommendations for Further Study

The results of this study open up further opportunities for research focused on support staff overall, and the connection between this employee group and student success. The researcher utilized surveys and interviews during this study and engaged multiple groups of participants, including students, support staff, and administration. However, the researcher chose to concentrate on the support staff perspective, and this group was the only group to receive both a survey and participate in interviews. It is important to develop a more thorough understanding of the role of support staff from the student perspective, and so the researcher believes that additional research should be conducted in order to explore this topic more fully.

Additionally, the researcher recommends further research focused on professional development and training programs for support staff and the impact that these programs have on support staff job performance, morale, employee turnover, and customer (student) satisfaction. It would be useful to conduct a customer satisfaction survey at an institution that lacks professional development opportunities for support staff, implement a professional development program, and conduct a follow-up customer satisfaction survey to determine the effects that staff training has.

Conclusion

The primary goals of this study were to discover the perception that support staff have of their roles in student success, and determine ways to maximize support staff performance to cultivate an ideal environment for student success. If, as the literature suggests, the institutional environment and customer service are both critical factors in the student success equation, then colleges must recognize these as areas in which all campus employees contribute. Human resources are an important aspect of organizational structure, and a shift to a student-centered institution cannot occur without the participation of all employee groups. Institutions need to encourage support staff to participate in institutional efforts affecting student success and should develop professional development programs specifically for this employee group.

Personal Reflection

The researcher's employment trajectory over the past thirteen years of working in community colleges served as the inspiration for this study, coupled with the researcher's own experiences as a community college student. She began her community college career as a support staff employee and became a community college student one year later, during which time she was able to witness the many ways in which support staff can impact students both positively and negatively. Reflecting on those years, the researcher vividly recalls one incident in which a student who was enrolled in a cohort program was on the verge of not being able to graduate with his group due to a paperwork issue. The researcher was able to assist the student by going the extra mile so the student could graduate on schedule with all of his cohort members. The student was extremely grateful. As a token of his appreciation he invited the researcher to attend

commencement and sit with his family, which she proudly did. During the commencement ceremony, she could not help but wonder what would have happened to the student had someone else refused to go the extra mile and assist.

Years later, the researcher moved on to become a supervisor of support staff and then an administrator, accepting employment at a different community college along the way. Her move to a different institution coincided with the beginning of her doctoral studies, where she was able to connect with employees from community colleges across the Midwest. Experiencing a new institution firsthand and engaging in conversations with employees from multiple colleges about the role of support staff allowed the researcher to realize that, while she always felt appreciated as a support staff member herself, support staff at other institutions do not always feel the same. The researcher thus began to question if her experience was unique, and wanted to explore the role of community college support staff in-depth. However, the literature reveals very little about this employee group and so the idea for this study was formed. This dissertation is intended to provide a voice to a group of employees that have the potential to be a powerful force in the lives of community college students, but are not always given the opportunity to do so.

REFERENCES

- Achieving the Dream. (2012). The Challenge. Retrieved from
<http://www.achievingthedream.org/goal/challenge>
- Alden, S. (2012, June 21). Supporting front-line hospital staff leads to safer and happier patients. Retrieved from Health Behavior News Service website:
<http://www.cfah.org/hbns/archives/getDocument.cfm?documentID=22527>
- American Federation of Teachers. (2011). Student Success in Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/highered/studentsuccess0311.pdf>
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2014). *94th aacc annual convention*. Retrieved from
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/newsevents/Events/convention2/Pages/default.aspx>
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2012). *Reclaiming the American dream: Community colleges and the nation's future*. Retrieved from
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/aboutcc/21stcenturyreport/index.html>
- The Aspen Institute. (2012). *The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, College Excellence Program.
- Atkins, A. (2012, June). Building trust in business 2012. Retrieved from Interaction Associates website: www.interactionassociates.com
- Badri, M. A., Selim, H., Alshare, K., Grandon, E. E., Younis, H., & Abdulla, M. (2006). The baldridge education criteria for performance excellence framework: Empirical

- test and validation. *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management*, 23(9), 1118-1157.
- Baker, G. A. (2003). Achieving transformational change. *Leadership strategies for community college executives* (pp. 13-24). Washington, D.C.: Community College Press.
- Barr, M. J., & McClellan, G. S. (2011). *Budgets and financial management in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bejou, D. (2005, March/April). Treating students like customers. *Biz Ed Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.aacsb.edu/publications/Archives/marapr05-toc>.
- Bentz, V.M., & D.A. Rehorick (2009). Transformative phenomenology: A scholarly scaffold for practitioners. In D.A. Rehorick, et al. (Eds.), *Transformative phenomenology: Changing ourselves, lifeworlds, and professional practice*. United Kingdom: Lexington Books.
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2012). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston: Pearson.
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2008). Reframing leadership. *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (pp. 341-372). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Boyd, R. L. (2012, June 18). Customer service in higher education: Finding a middle ground. *The Mentor*. Retrieved from <http://dus.psu.edu/mentor>

Byrd, K., & MacDonald, G. (2005). Defining College Readiness from the Inside Out: First-Generation College Student Perspectives. Retrieved from

<http://faculty.washington.edu/gmac/pdf/CollegeReadiness.pdf>

Cascadia Community College. (2012, June 30). Strategic directions summary report.

Retrieved from Cascadia Community College website:

<http://www.cascadia.edu/discover/governance/documents>

Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A Matter of Degrees:*

Promising Practices for Community College Student Success (A First Look).

Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.

Community College of Baltimore. (2011). Professional development. Retrieved from

Community College of Baltimore County website:

<http://www.ccbcmd.edu/pd/plan/structure.html#ind>

Community College of Denver. (2014). Human resources. Retrieved from Community

College of Denver website: <http://www.ccd.edu/ccd.nsf/html/WEBB8CUJ2L-Human+Resources>

Covey, S. (2012, August 20). How the best leaders build trust. Retrieved from Leadership

Now website: <http://www.leadershipnow.com>

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods*

approaches. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano-Clark, V. L. (2011). Understanding mixed methods research. In

Designing and conducting mixed methods research (pp. 1-19). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

- Culp, M. M. (2005). Doing more of what matters: The key to student success. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 131*, 77-87.
- Dale, P. A., & Drake, T. M. (2005). Connecting academic and student affairs to enhance student learning and success. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 131*, 51-64.
- Demetriou, C. (2008, September 30). Arguments against applying a customer-service paradigm. *The Mentor*. Retrieved from <http://dus.psu.edu/mentor>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Dey, E. L. (1997). Working with low survey response rates: The efficacy of weighting adjustments. *Research in Higher Education, 38*(2), 215-227.
- Dickeson, R. C. (2010). *Prioritizing academic programs and services: Reallocating resources to achieve strategic success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Emery, C., Kramer, T., & Tian, R. (2001). Customers vs. products: Adopting an effective approach to business students. *Quality Assurance in Education, 9*(2), 110–115.
Retrieved from <http://www.bus.lsu.edu>
- Fabre, J. (2012). The importance of empowering frontline staff. *California Builder*.
Retrieved from <http://www.cbia.org>
- Friesen, K. (2002). Classified staff development: An integrated model. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 120*, 43-50.
- Gibson-Harman, K., Rodriguez, S., & Grant Haworth, J. (2002). Community college faculty and professional staff: The human resource challenge. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 117*, 77-90.

- Gonzalez, J. (2012, April 21). Community colleges not up to 21st-century mission, their own report says. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/section/Home/5>
- Higher Learning Commission. (2014). *2014 annual conference program overview*. Retrieved from <http://annualconference.ncahlc.org/>
- Hull, J. R., & Keim, M. C. (2007). Nature and status of community college leadership development programs. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *31*, 689-702.
- Humber College (2013). The centre for teaching & learning. Retrieved from Humber College website:
<http://www.humber.ca/centreforteachingandlearning/professional-development.html>
- Institutional Review Board (n.d.) Retrieved from Ferris State University website:
<http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/administration/academicaffairs/vpoffice/IRB/>
- Izadi, M., Kashef, A. E., & Stadt, R. W. (1996). Quality in higher education: Lessons learned from the Baldrige award, Deming prize, and ISO 9000 registration. *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education*, *33*(2), 60-76.
- Kirkwood Community College. (2013). Faculty professional development. Retrieved from Kirkwood Community College website:
<http://www.kirkwood.edu/site/index.php?p=27178>
- Kotter, J. P. (1995). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. In Harvard Business Review, *HBR's 10 must reads on change management* (1-16). Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

- Kozeracki, C. A., & Brooks, J. B. (2006). Emerging institutional support for developmental education. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 136*, 63-73.
- Lane Community College. (2014). Professional and organizational development. Retrieved from Lane Community College website:
<http://www.lanecc.edu/pod/programs>
- League for Innovation in the Community College. (2000, April). *League selects vanguard learning colleges*. Retrieved from
http://www.league.org/about/press/vanguard_selection.htm
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Locke, M. G., & Guglielmino, L. (2006). It's not just a job anymore: The influence of cultural change on student services staff in a community college. *NASPA Journal, 43*(2), 216-242.
- Lumby, J. (2012). Leading organizational culture: Issues of power and equity. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership, 40*(5), 576-591.
- Madison Area Technical College. (2014). Professional development. Retrieved from Madison Area Technical College website:
<http://madisoncollege.edu/in/professional-development-planning>
- McClenney, K. M., & Arnsperger, A. (2012). *Students speak: Are we listening?* Austin, TX: Center For Community College Student Engagement.
- McClenney, K. (2009). Helping community-college students succeed: A moral imperative. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 55*(33), A60.
- McClenney, K. M., & Waiwaiole, E. N. (2005). Focus on student retention: Promising practices in community colleges. *Community College Journal, 75*(6), 36-41.

- Medlock Community College (pseudonym). (2014, March). *Fast Facts*.
- Medlock Community College (pseudonym). (2012, March). *Core team handbook*.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*.
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, R. A. (2009). Ready or not? *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 145, 59-66. doi:10.1002/cc.355
- Moraine Valley Community College. (2013). Center for teaching & learning. Retrieved from Moraine Valley Community College website:
<http://www.morainevalley.edu/ctl/staffResources/default.htm>
- Myran, G. (2009). A new open-door model for community colleges. In *Reinventing the open door: Transformational strategies for community colleges* (pp. 1-11).
Washington DC: Community College Press.
- O'Banion, T. (1997). *A learning college for the 21st century*. Westport, CT: American Council on Education and Oryx Press.
- O'Banion, T. (1999). Launching a learning-centered college. *League for Innovation in the Community College*. PeopleSoft, Inc.
- O'Banion, T. (2013). *Access, success, and completion: A primer for community college faculty, administrators, staff, and trustees*. Chandler, AZ: League for Innovation in the Community College.
- Palomar Community College. (2014). Professional development. Retrieved from Palomar Community College website: <http://www.palomar.edu/pd/index.html>
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Richland College. (2014). Professional development requirements. Retrieved from Richland Community College website:
<http://www.richlandcollege.edu/thunderwater/proDevelopment.php>
- Schmitt, M., & Duggan, M. H. (2011). Exploring the impact of classified staff interactions on student retention: A multiple case study approach. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 35, 179-190.
- Shannon, H. D., & Smith, R. C. (2006). A case for the community college's open access mission. In *Community college missions in the 21st century* (pp. 15-21). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shumar, W. (1997). *College for sale: A critique of the commodification of higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Sinclair Community College. (2014). Staff development and innovation committee. Retrieved from Sinclair Community College website:
<http://www.sinclair.edu/about/offices/SDIC/>
- Sines, Jr., R. G., & Duckworth, E. A. (1994). Customer service in higher education. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 5(2), 1-15.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Tinto, V. (2007). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention*, 8(1), 1-19.
- Tinto, V., & Pusser, B. (2006). Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success. *National Postsecondary Education*

- Cooperative*. Retrieved from
http://web.ewu.edu/groups/academicaffairs/IR/NPEC_5_Tinto_Pusser_Report.pdf
- Turban, E., King, D., Lee, J., Liang, T.-, & Turban, D. (2011). *Electronic commerce 2012: A managerial and social networks perspectives*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Valencia Community College. (2014). Faculty and staff. Retrieved from Valencia Community College website: <http://valenciacollege.edu/faculty.cfm>
- VanDerLinden, K. E. (2005). Learning to play the game: Professional development and mentoring. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 29, 729-743.
- Van Teijlingen, E. R., & Hundley, V. (2001). The importance of pilot studies. *Social Research Update*, (35), 1-4. Retrieved from <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/>
- Vogt, W. P. (2007). *Quantitative research methods for professionals*. Boston: Pearson.
- Weidner, L. (2008). *Understanding and application of learning college concepts among community college support staff employees*.
- Weinberg, D. B., Avgar, A. C., Sugrue, N. M., & Cooney-Miner, D. (2012). The importance of a high performance work environment in hospitals. *Health Services Research*. Retrieved from
<http://www.cfah.org/hbns/archives/getDocument.cfm?documentID=22527>
- West, C., Shulock, N., & Moore, C. (2012). *Measuring Institutional Conditions that Support Student Success in the California Community Colleges*. Los Angeles, CA: UC/ACCORD

The White House. (2010). *The white house summit on community colleges* [summit report]. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/white-house-summit-community-college>

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2009). Excerpts from the president's remarks in Warren, Michigan. Retrieved from http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Excerpts-of-the-Presidents-remarks-in-Warren-Michigan-and-fact-sheet-on-the-American-Graduation-Initiative/

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2009). Remarks of president barack obama – as prepared for delivery. Retrieved January, 2014 from http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Address-to-Joint-Session-of-Congress

Wyner, J. (2012, September 6). Can do for community college. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from www.insidehighered.com

Wyner, J. (2012, May & June). What is community college excellence? lessons from the aspen prize. *Change*, 14-20. Retrieved from <http://www.changemag.org>

APPENDIX
A: QUESTIONNAIRES

Student Questionnaire

First Screen of Online Survey:

PROJECT TITLE: The Role of Community College Support Staff in Student Success Initiatives (Working Title)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lori Gonko, Ferris State University Doctoral Candidate

EMAIL: email@email.com **PHONE:** (phone number)

FACULTY ADVISOR: Dr. Noreen Thomas **EMAIL:** email@ferris.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the roles that community college support staff employees play in student learning and success, and the need for professional development programs for frontline/support staff at community colleges.

The purpose of this study is to

- Explore perceptions of community college support staff roles in student success initiatives from the student, support staff, and administrative perspectives.
- Address the need for professional development programs for frontline and support staff at community colleges.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about your perceptions of the role support staff employees play in student success. It is estimated that participation in this online survey will take between 5-10 minutes of your time to complete. The overall benefits to participation are that you will be helping community college leaders better understand the role of support staff employees in creating and fostering a college environment focused on student success. There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Risks and Voluntary Nature of the Study:

The study will present no greater risk than what one encounters in daily life. The survey data will be collected anonymously, and your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may terminate your participation in this study at any time by exiting the survey. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this study, please contact the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Noreen Thomas, listed above. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the

Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at: 1201 S. State St. - CSS 310, Big Rapids, MI 49307 (231) 591-2553 or IRB@ferris.edu.

By clicking “Next,” you consent to participate in this research study and will be taken to the survey questions. Please print this page if you wish to retain a copy of this consent for your records.

Screen Two: The purpose of this survey is to determine your perceptions of support staff employees at your community college. For this survey, support staff members can include all of the following groups of employees:

- a. Administrative assistants and secretaries
- b. Student services staff, including those in admissions/enrollment, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran’s services, and job placement
- c. Instructional support, such as program and lab assistants who help in classrooms
- d. Facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees
- e. Campus Security
- f. Dining service staff
- g. “Behind the scenes” employees, such as business services, campus mailroom, copying/printing, and IT

Screen Three:

1. Age:
 - a. Under 18
 - b. 18 – 29
 - c. 30 – 39
 - d. 40 – 49
 - e. 50 – 59
 - f. 60 or older
2. Gender (male / female)
3. Race/Ethnicity:
 - a. African American/Black
 - b. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - c. Asian
 - d. Hispanic/Latino
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. White/Caucasian
 - g. Other / Multiracial
4. How long have you been a student at Medlock Community College?

- a. Less than one year
 - b. Between 1 and 2 years
 - c. Between 2 and 4 years
 - d. Longer than 4 years
5. Approximately how many credits have you completed at Medlock Community College?
6. What is your approximate GPA?
7. Who is responsible for helping students succeed in a community college? (Check all that apply):
- Faculty/Instructors
 - Administration (including the President)
 - Counselors and Academic Advisors
 - Administrative assistants and secretaries
 - Student services staff, including those in admissions/enrollment, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran's services, and job placement
 - Instructional support, such as program and lab assistants who help in classrooms
 - Facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees
 - Campus Security
 - Dining service staff
 - "Behind the scenes" employees, such as business services, campus mailroom, copying/printing, and IT
8. Approximately, how many times have you had contact with college support staff (non-teaching staff) in the past semester? _____ (number)
9. Every college employee plays a role in helping students learn, no matter what the job is.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
10. Support staff play an important role at MCC in helping students learn.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree

11. The support staff at MCC know how to help students succeed.
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree

12. The support staff at MCC need training so that they can help students succeed.
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree

13. Most MCC support staff employees choose to work at a community college because they are committed to helping students.
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree

14. Thinking back on your past interactions with college support staff members. In your typical experiences, please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 as the lowest score and 10 as the highest:
 - a. When interacting with support staff, staff members were knowledgeable and helpful.
 - b. When interacting with support staff, staff members were courteous and professional.
 - c. When interacting with support staff, staff members were able to provide me with correct information.
 - d. Some support staff members were more helpful than others.
 - e. Overall, I am satisfied with my experiences.

Support Staff Questionnaire

First Screen of Online Survey:

PROJECT TITLE: The Role of Community College Support Staff in Student Success Initiatives (Working Title)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lori Gonko, Ferris State University Doctoral Candidate

EMAIL: email@email.com

PHONE: (phone number)

FACULTY ADVISOR: Dr. Noreen Thomas

EMAIL: email@ferris.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the roles that community college support staff employees play in student learning and success, and the need for professional development programs for frontline/support staff at community colleges.

The purpose of this study is to

- Explore perceptions of community college support staff roles in student success initiatives from the student, support staff, and administrative perspectives.
- Address the need for professional development programs for frontline and support staff at community colleges.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about your perceptions of the role support staff employees play in student success. It is estimated that participation in this online survey will take between 5-10 minutes of your time to complete. The overall benefits to participation are that you will be helping community college leaders better understand the role of support staff employees in creating and fostering a college environment focused on student success. There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Risks and Voluntary Nature of the Study:

The study will present no greater risk than what one encounters in daily life. The survey data will be collected anonymously, and your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may terminate your participation in this study at any time by exiting the survey. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this study, please contact the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Noreen Thomas, listed above. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at: 1201 S. State St. - CSS 310, Big Rapids, MI 49307 (231) 591-2553 or IRB@ferris.edu.

By clicking “Next,” you consent to participate in this research study and will be taken to the survey questions. Please print this page if you wish to retain a copy of this consent for your records.

Screen Two:

1. Gender (male / female)
2. Age:
 - a. Under 18 - *If this response is selected, the survey will close out and the respondent will not be able to participate.*
 - b. 18 – 29
 - c. 30 – 39
 - d. 40 – 49
 - e. 50 – 59
 - f. 60 or older
3. Race/Ethnicity:
 - a. African American/Black
 - b. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - c. Asian
 - d. Hispanic/Latino
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. White/Caucasian
 - g. Other / Multiracial
4. Indicate how long (in years) you have been employed in higher education:
 - a. Less than one year
 - b. Between 1 and 5 years
 - c. Between 5 and 10 years
 - d. Between 10 and 20 years
 - e. Longer than 20 years
5. How long have you been in your current position at _____ (institution)?
 - a. Less than one year
 - b. Between 1 and 5 years
 - c. Between 5 and 10 years
 - d. Between 10 and 20 years
 - e. Longer than 20 years
6. Which of the following categories best describes your job?
 - a. Administrative Assistant
 - b. Student services staff, including: admissions/enrollment, advising/counseling, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran’s services, and job placement

- c. Instructional support, such as program and lab assistants
 - d. Facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees
 - e. Campus security
 - f. Dining service
 - g. Technical support staff, such as media services and IT
 - h. Business Services, including accounting, mailroom, and copying/printing
 - i. Other (please describe)
7. Approximately what percentage of your job involves interaction with students? These interactions could be face-to-face, email, telephone, informal, or formal interactions.
- a. 0 – 25%
 - b. 26% - 50%
 - c. 51% - 75%
 - d. 76% - 100%
8. Every college employee plays a role in helping students learn and succeed, no matter what their job is.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
9. Support staff play an important role at _____ (institution) in helping students learn and succeed.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
10. My role as a support staff employee at _____ (institution) is important in helping students learn and succeed.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
11. My institutional leadership understands the importance of the role of support staff in helping students learn and succeed.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral

- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

12. I know what I need to know to help students learn and succeed.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

13. I am provided adequate training to perform my job.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

14. My job duties, as I understand them, include assisting and providing excellent customer service to students.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

15. Providing excellent customer service to students is one way that I (as a support staff member) can help students learn and succeed.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

16. The support staff at _____ (institution) need training so that they can help students learn and succeed.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

17. In my position as a support staff employee, I could do more to help students succeed if I had the opportunity and additional training.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral

- d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
18. _____ (Institution) offers professional development opportunities for support staff.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
19. My immediate supervisor allows me to attend professional development opportunities.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
20. My immediate supervisor encourages me to attend professional development opportunities.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
21. I am interested in furthering my professional skills by attending training and development opportunities.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
22. Most support staff employees at _____ (institution) choose to work at a community college because they are committed to helping students.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
23. It is important for me to understand new ideas and student success strategies that the college adopts in order for me to better help the students succeed.
- a. Strongly disagree

- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

APPENDIX
B: INVITATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN QUESTIONNAIRES

Student Invitation

Dear MCC Student:

My name is Lori Gonko, an MCC employee and a doctoral student at Ferris State University. I am preparing to conduct my dissertation research and I would like your help.

I am interested in learning about your experiences here at Medlock and the kinds of interactions that you have had with our support staff on campus. In order for me to learn about this, I am asking you to complete a short questionnaire (about 5 minutes) online answering questions about the number of times you have interacted with our staff and how those experiences were.

All responses and information you provide will be anonymous and no one at MCC will know whether you participate or not. The survey will not ask for your name, and your answers cannot be linked to your email address. Of course, this is voluntary and you are not in any way obligated to participate in this study.

I would really appreciate your participation, and I am looking forward to learning more about your experiences.

If you have any questions, there are several ways that you can reach me. You may call me at my office (phone number), send me an email at my college email address (email@email.edu), or at my personal email address (email@email.com).

Sincerely,

Lori M. Gonko

Support Staff Invitation

Dear MCC Support Staff Employee:

My name is Lori Gonko, an MCC employee and a doctoral student at Ferris State University. I am preparing to conduct my dissertation research and I am requesting your help.

I am interested in learning about your job and the kinds of things you do that help our students succeed in their educational endeavors. In order for me to learn about this, I am asking you to complete a short questionnaire (about 5 – 10 minutes) online, answering questions about the kinds of work you do.

All responses and information you provide will be anonymous and no one at MCC will know whether you participate or not. The survey will not ask for your name, and your answers cannot be linked to your email address. Of course, this is voluntary and you are not in any way obligated to participate in this study.

I would really appreciate your participation, and I am looking forward to learning more about your thoughts and experiences.

If you have any questions, there are several ways that you can reach me. You may call me at my office (Ext. XXXX), on my private cell phone at (phone number), via my college email address (email@email.edu), or via my personal email address (email@email.com). If you would prefer that I communicate with you using your own personal email address (as opposed to your college address), please reach me using one of the communication methods listed above.

Sincerely,

Lori M. Gonko

APPENDIX
C: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTS

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT – ONLINE SURVEYS

(Information below will be provided at the beginning of the student and support staff online surveys, as noted in Appendix A)

PROJECT TITLE: The Role of Community College Support Staff in Student Success Initiatives (Working Title)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lori Gonko, Ferris State University Doctoral Candidate

EMAIL: email@email.com

PHONE: (phone number)

FACULTY ADVISOR: Dr. Noreen Thomas

EMAIL: email@ferris.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the roles that community college support staff employees play in student learning and success, and the need for professional development programs for frontline/support staff at community colleges.

The purpose of this study is to

- Explore perceptions of community college support staff roles in student success initiatives from the student, support staff, and administrative perspectives.
- Address the need for professional development programs for frontline and support staff at community colleges.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about your perceptions of the role support staff employees play in student success. It is estimated that participation in this online survey will take between 5-10 minutes of your time to complete. The overall benefits to participation are that you will be helping community college leaders better understand the role of support staff employees in creating and fostering a college environment focused on student success. There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Risks and Voluntary Nature of the Study:

The study will present no greater risk than what one encounters in daily life. The survey data will be collected anonymously, and your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may terminate your participation in this study at any time by exiting the survey. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this study, please contact the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Noreen Thomas, listed above. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at: 1201 S. State St. - CSS 310, Big Rapids, MI 49307 (231) 591-2553 or IRB@ferris.edu.

By clicking “Next,” you consent to participate in this research study and will be taken to the survey questions. Please print this page if you wish to retain a copy of this consent for your records.

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT – INTERVIEWS

PROJECT TITLE: The Role of Community College Support Staff in Student Success Initiatives (Working Title)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lori Gonko, Ferris State University Doctoral Candidate

EMAIL: email@email.com **PHONE:** (phone number)

FACULTY ADVISOR: Dr. Noreen Thomas **EMAIL:** email@ferris.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the roles that community college support staff employees play in student learning and success, and the need for professional development programs for frontline/support staff at community colleges.

The purpose of this study is to

- Explore perceptions of community college support staff roles in student success initiatives from the student, support staff, and administrative perspectives.
- Address the need for professional development programs for frontline and support staff at community colleges.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a private (one-on-one) in-depth interview with the researcher to gather more details about your thoughts and experiences. This interview should take approximately 1 hour to complete and can be completed at your preference either before or after work hours, during your lunch hour, or during work hours with your supervisor's approval. (Interviewees will have an opportunity to review a transcript of their interview prior to inclusion in the study. At that time, corrections may be made if desired.)

The overall benefits to participation are that you will be helping community college leaders better understand the role of support staff employees in creating and fostering a college environment focused on student success. There will be no compensation for participating in this interview.

Risks and Voluntary Nature of the Study:

The study will present no greater risk than what one encounters in daily life. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may also refuse to answer any questions at any time, without consequence.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. The interview audio recordings, researcher's notes, and all data collected for this study will be kept confidential by the researcher, stored at the researcher's home, away from the campus. After five years, all records will be destroyed. Responses and identities will be coded so that individuals

cannot be identified. The researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant in any report of this study.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this study, please contact the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Noreen Thomas, listed above. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at: 1201 S. State St. - CSS 310, Big Rapids, MI 49307 (231) 591-2553 or IRB@ferris.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. If I had any questions, I have asked them and received answers from the appropriate party. I consent to participate in the study.

Name (printed) _____

Signature _____

Date _____

By signing this form, you consent to participate in this research study. A copy of this document will be provided to you for your records.

APPENDIX
D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*Only main questions are included here. Follow-up and probe questions will vary with each interview, depending upon interviewee individual responses to the main questions.

Support Staff Interview Questions

1. Job title:
2. In what year did you begin working at _____ (institution)?
3. How long have you been in your current position at _____ (institution)?
4. I choose to work in higher education because:
5. Please explain a typical workday for you and help me understand the kinds of things you do in your job to support student success.
6. Do you believe that your job/role here helps students succeed and achieve their educational goals?
7. If yes, does the idea that you are helping students succeed impact the way that you feel about your job at the college? If so, can you describe how?
8. If no, why do you feel that your job does not help students succeed?
9. Please describe the types of support and training that are offered to support staff at your institution.

Administration Interview Questions

1. Job title:
2. In what year did you begin working at _____ (institution)?
3. How long have you been in your current position at _____ (institution)?
4. How many support staff employees are under your direct supervision?
5. Have you ever been employed as a support staff member in higher education (at your current institution or any others)?
6. Please describe your thoughts on the following statement: Every college employee plays a role in helping students learn, no matter what the job is.
7. What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in creating an institutional environment focused on student success?
8. What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required skills?
9. Does your institution currently offer any professional development programs for support staff? Please describe.

APPENDIX
E: INVITATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEWS

Support Staff Interview Invitation

Dear [Name]:

My name is Lori Gonko, an MCC employee and a doctoral student at Ferris State University. I am preparing to conduct my dissertation research on the topic of community college support staff and I am requesting your help.

You may recall that I recently sent out an invitation to participate in an online survey regarding the role of support staff here at MCC and how this employee group helps our students. (If you chose to complete the survey, thank you for taking the time to do that.) While the survey data will certainly be helpful as I move forward with my study, I am also hoping to learn about this topic in more detail by interviewing the experts – our support staff.

Would you be willing to spend an hour with me in an interview, discussing your work in greater detail?

All responses and information you provide will be confidential and will not be shared with anyone at MCC, and I will not use any names when reporting data in my dissertation. In addition, you will have the opportunity to review and revise your responses after the interview, before I include them in my research.

If you are interested in participating, I am willing to meet with you before or after work, or during your lunch hour. If your supervisor approves, we can also conduct the interview during the workday. All interviews will be conducted in a private location on or off campus, at your preference. I would really appreciate your participation, and I am looking forward to learning more about your thoughts and experiences.

If you have any questions, there are several ways that you can reach me. You may call me at my office (Ext. XXXX), on my cell phone at (phone number), via my college email address (email@email.edu), or via my personal email address (email@email.com). Please let me know if you are willing to participate as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Lori M. Gonko

Administrative Interview Invitation

*These invitations will be sent to my peers on campus. As such, they will require a less formal introduction.

Dear [Name]:

As you may be aware, I am a doctoral student at Ferris State University, pursuing my Doctorate in Community College Leadership. I am currently preparing to conduct my dissertation research on the topic of community college support staff and I am requesting your help.

My dissertation is focused on the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant correlation between student success and support staff interaction?
2. Do support staff employees perceive that they have a role in supporting student success? What is that perception, and how does it compare to support staff perceptions at other mid-west institutions?
3. What skills are required of support staff in order for them to fully participate in an institutional environment focused on student success?
4. What types of professional development programs will support and enhance the required support staff skills?

In order to explore these questions from a variety of perspectives, I will be surveying students, support staff, and administrators. My hope is that you will be willing to spend an hour with me, discussing your perceptions of support staff, the role that they play in student success, and their professional development needs.

All responses and information you provide will be confidential and will not be shared with anyone at MCC, and I will not use any names when reporting data in my dissertation. In addition, you will have the opportunity to review and revise your responses after the interview, before I include them in my research.

If you are interested in participating, I am willing to meet with you at your convenience, during the work day or outside of it. All interviews will be conducted in a private location on or off campus, at your preference. I would really appreciate your participation, and I am looking forward to learning more about your thoughts on this topic.

If you have any questions, there are several ways that you can reach me. You may call me at my office (Ext. XXXX), on my cell phone at (phone number), via my college email address (email@email.edu), or via my personal email address (email@email.com). Please let me know if you are willing to participate as soon as possible.

Sincerely,
Lori M. Gonko

APPENDIX
F: CODING SCHEMA

1. Support Staff Role in Student Success
 - a. RSS1 – Retention
 - b. RSS2 – Teachable moments (teaching students policies, procedures, social skills)
 - c. RSS3 – Creating a positive “community” atmosphere
 - d. RSS4 – Providing students access to resources (other personnel, Internet, computers, specialized equipment)

2. Required Knowledge, Skills, Abilities/KSA
 - a. KSA1 – Customer service skills
 - b. KSA2 – Knowledge of institution
 - c. KSA3 – Technical skills (computers, software)
 - d. KSA4 – Communication skills
 - e. KSA5 – Positive attitude
 - f. KSA6 – Sense of professionalism
 - g. KSA7 – Sense of ownership
 - h. KSA8 – Desire to learn

3. Types of Professional Development Programs: Desired
 - a. PDD1 – Online/Webinars
 - b. PDD2 – Customer service training
 - c. PDD3 – Basic clerical skills (filing, typing, Office, business communication, etc.)
 - d. PDD4 – Peer training
 - e. PDD5 – Cross training (learning about another department, i.e. Financial Aid)
 - f. PDD6 – Overall college orientation

4. Types of Professional Development Programs: Existing
 - a. PDE1 – Underground network
 - b. PDE2 – Tuition waiver/college courses
 - c. PDE3 – Basic computer skills

5. Issues with PD
 - a. IPD1 – Lack of professional development for support staff
 - b. IPD2 – Not enough time to engage in professional development
 - c. IPD3 – Staff do not want to engage in professional development
 - d. IPD4 – Broad staff categories. How do you make PD meaningful for all?

6. Institutional Issues
 - a. II1 – Marginalization of support staff
 - b. II2 – Lack of cross-departmental communication

APPENDIX
G: SUPPORT STAFF QUESTIONNAIRE PARTICIPANT
DEMOGRAPHICS

Medlock Community College

Please select your gender:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	24.4%	10
Female	75.6%	31
<i>answered question</i>		41
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Please select your age:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Under 18	0.0%	0
18 – 29	2.4%	1
30 – 39	12.2%	5
40 – 49	26.8%	11
50 – 59	39.0%	16
60 or older	19.5%	8
<i>answered question</i>		41
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Please select your race/ethnicity:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
African American/Black	7.3%	3
American Indian or Alaska Native	2.4%	1
Asian	0.0%	0
Hispanic/Latino	4.9%	2
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0
White/Caucasian	82.9%	34
Other / Multiracial	2.4%	1
<i>answered question</i>		41
<i>skipped question</i>		0

How long have you been employed in higher education, at any institution?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	0.0%	0
Between 1 and 5 years	14.6%	6
Between 5 and 10 years	14.6%	6
Between 10 and 20 years	43.9%	18
Longer than 20 years	26.8%	11
<i>answered question</i>		41
<i>skipped question</i>		0

How long have you been in your current position at Medlock Community College?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	12.2%	5
Between 1 and 5 years	29.3%	12
Between 5 and 10 years	17.1%	7
Between 10 and 20 years	34.1%	14
Longer than 20 years	7.3%	3
<i>answered question</i>		41
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Which of the following categories best describes your job?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Administrative Assistant	24.4%	9
Student services staff, including: admissions/enrollment, advising/counseling, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran's services, and job placement	26.8%	11
Instructional support, such as program and lab assistants	7.3%	3
Facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees	9.8%	4
Campus security	0.0%	0
Dining service	2.4%	1
Technical support staff, such as media services and IT	9.8%	4
Business Services, including accounting, mailroom, and copying/printing	19.5%	8
Other (please specify)	0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>		41
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Institution A

Please select your gender:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	17.9%	5
Female	82.1%	23
<i>answered question</i>		28
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Please select your age:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Under 18	0.0%	0
18 – 29	7.4%	2
30 – 39	25.9%	7
40 – 49	18.5%	5
50 – 59	25.9%	7
60 or older	22.2%	6
<i>answered question</i>		27
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Please select your race/ethnicity:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
African American/Black	3.7%	1
American Indian or Alaska Native	3.7%	1
Asian	0.0%	0
Hispanic/Latino	0.0%	0
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0
White/Caucasian	88.9%	24
Other / Multiracial	7.4%	2
<i>answered question</i>		27
<i>skipped question</i>		1

How long have you been employed in higher education, at any institution?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	0.0%	0
Between 1 and 5 years	25.0%	7
Between 5 and 10 years	35.7%	10
Between 10 and 20 years	28.6%	8
Longer than 20 years	10.7%	3
<i>answered question</i>		28
<i>skipped question</i>		0

How long have you been in your current position at Institution A?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	14.3%	4
Between 1 and 5 years	32.1%	9
Between 5 and 10 years	28.6%	8
Between 10 and 20 years	17.9%	5
Longer than 20 years	7.1%	2
<i>answered question</i>		28
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Which of the following categories best describes your job?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Administrative Assistant	25.0%	7
Student services staff, including: admissions/enrollment, advising/counseling, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran's services, and job placement	50.0%	14
Instructional support, such as program and lab assistants	17.9%	5
Facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees	0.0%	0
Campus security	0.0%	0
Dining service	0.0%	0
Technical support staff, such as media services and IT	0.0%	0
Business Services, including accounting, mailroom, and copying/printing	0.0%	0
Other (please specify)	7.1%	2
<i>answered question</i>		28
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Number	Response Date	Other (please specify)	Categories
1	Feb 5, 2014 6:35 PM	instructional, student, and facilities support	
2	Feb 3, 2014 7:44 PM	Athletics	

Institution B

Please select your gender:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	25.9%	14
Female	74.1%	40
<i>answered question</i>		54
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Please select your age:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Under 18	0.0%	0
18 – 29	7.4%	4
30 – 39	11.1%	6
40 – 49	27.8%	15
50 – 59	40.7%	22
60 or older	13.0%	7
<i>answered question</i>		54
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Please select your race/ethnicity:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
African American/Black	9.1%	5
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0%	0
Asian	0.0%	0
Hispanic/Latino	0.0%	0
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0
White/Caucasian	89.1%	49
Other / Multiracial	1.8%	1
<i>answered question</i>		55
<i>skipped question</i>		0

How long have you been employed in higher education, at any institution?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	1.9%	1
Between 1 and 5 years	18.5%	10
Between 5 and 10 years	18.5%	10
Between 10 and 20 years	33.3%	18
Longer than 20 years	27.8%	15
<i>answered question</i>		54
<i>skipped question</i>		1

How long have you been in your current position at Institution B?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	7.4%	4
Between 1 and 5 years	29.6%	16
Between 5 and 10 years	18.5%	10
Between 10 and 20 years	29.6%	16
Longer than 20 years	14.8%	8
<i>answered question</i>		54
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Which of the following categories best describes your job?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Administrative Assistant	13.0%	7
Student services staff, including: admissions/enrollment, advising/counseling, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran's services, and job placement	29.6%	16
Instructional support, such as program and lab assistants	7.4%	4
Facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees	9.3%	5
Campus security	1.9%	1
Dining service	0.0%	0
Technical support staff, such as media services and IT	16.7%	9
Business Services, including accounting, mailroom, and copying/printing	1.9%	1
Other (please specify)	20.4%	11
<i>answered question</i>		54
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Number	Response Date	Other (please specify)	Categories
1	Feb 28, 2014 3:18 PM	Staff Development	
2	Feb 24, 2014 1:44 PM	Research Assistant	
3	Feb 21, 2014 9:04 PM	full time switchboard opertor	
4	Feb 21, 2014 6:32 PM	Cashiers office	
5	Feb 21, 2014 6:05 PM	Bookstore Assistant Manager	
6	Feb 21, 2014 5:33 PM	support staff Training Specialist - Office of Staff development: Human	
7	Feb 21, 2014 4:49 PM	Resources	
8	Feb 21, 2014 3:06 PM	faculty support	
9	Feb 21, 2014 2:48 PM	Human Resources	
10	Feb 21, 2014 2:00 PM	Research and Assessment	
11	Feb 21, 2014 1:55 PM	Research & Planning	

Institution C

Please select your gender:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	10.0%	2
Female	90.0%	18
<i>answered question</i>		20
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Please select your age:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Under 18	0.0%	0
18 – 29	21.1%	4
30 – 39	15.8%	3
40 – 49	31.6%	6
50 – 59	21.1%	4
60 or older	10.5%	2
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Please select your race/ethnicity:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
African American/Black	0.0%	0
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0%	0
Asian	0.0%	0
Hispanic/Latino	10.5%	2
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0
White/Caucasian	84.2%	16
Other / Multiracial	5.3%	1
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		1

How long have you been employed in higher education, at any institution?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	0.0%	0
Between 1 and 5 years	10.0%	2
Between 5 and 10 years	55.0%	11
Between 10 and 20 years	20.0%	4
Longer than 20 years	15.0%	3
<i>answered question</i>		20
<i>skipped question</i>		0

How long have you been in your current position at Institution C?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than one year	10.0%	2
Between 1 and 5 years	20.0%	4
Between 5 and 10 years	40.0%	8
Between 10 and 20 years	20.0%	4
Longer than 20 years	10.0%	2
<i>answered question</i>		20
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Which of the following categories best describes your job?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Administrative Assistant	35.0%	7
Student services staff, including: admissions/enrollment, advising/counseling, testing/assessment, financial aid, library, bookstore, tutoring, student life, veteran's services, and job placement	35.0%	7
Instructional support, such as program and lab assistants	0.0%	0
Facilities, grounds, and maintenance employees	10.0%	2
Campus security	0.0%	0
Dining service	0.0%	0
Technical support staff, such as media services and IT	0.0%	0
Business Services, including accounting, mailroom, and copying/printing	0.0%	0
Other (please specify)	20.0%	4
<i>answered question</i>		20
<i>skipped question</i>		0

APPENDIX
H: MEDLOCK COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERVIEW AND
QUESTIONNAIRE SPREADSHEETS, CODED BY THEME

Support Staff Role in Student Success

Name	Retention	Teachable Moments	Creating Community Atmosphere	Providing Access to Resources
1. Michael	X		X	X
2. Charlotte	X		X	X
3. Juliet	X			X
4. Kate	X	X	X	X
5. Hugo	X		X	
6. Claire	X	X		X
7. Jack	X	X	X	X
8. Ana	X	X		X
9. James	X	X	X	X
10. Shannon	X	X		X
11. Libby	X		X	X
12. Rose	X	X	X	
Totals	12 (100%)	7 (58%)	8 (67%)	10 (83%)

Survey Quotes to Support

- "We all represent the face of the college at every level and with every interaction."
- "Absolutely, as a team working toward the common goal of providing the best institutional wide educational experience it is everyone's role to play a part!"
- "They are the first contact."
- "Relationships are built, connections are made and unofficial mentoring occurs. Students get a taste of what it is like in professional work environments and also receive guidance and advice." (Speaking to Work Study Students on campus.)
- "Not only do we play an important role, we are the cornerstone of MCC. We are the first people students see and speak to when they express an interest and we are the people they look to so they can maneuver through any issues or problems, we get them enrolled, we get them physically to their classes, we direct them and advise them at every turn while they are with us."
- "Since I am the Master Electrician, my interaction is usually providing help with directions, locations, and any other issue that I can see a need for."
- "Of course at the beginning of the semesters, especially Fall and Winter, the volume of working with the students is at the highest so we can get them settled in their classes."
- "We have had an intern work in our office. Also students working on campus are sent to our office to complete copying projects. We treat them with the same respect as any other employee and assist them to succeed whether it is understanding how the copier works or answering their questions."
- "I do not have contact with students unless they should call. When they do call, I try to direct them to the correct person to speak to about their problem."
- "Yes, indirectly, I would say support staff plays a critical role."
- "I operate equipment critical to student, faculty, and visitor satisfaction with our facilities."
- "We have had an intern in our department and I feel that my leadership and mentoring was helpful to her future."
- "If I don't know an answer, I try to find out for them or refer them to who can help them."
- "Support staff that do interact with students should provide excellent customer service to make the experience of college positive for the student."

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Name	Customer Service Skills	Knowledge of Institution	Technical Skills	Communication Skills	Positive Attitude	Sense of Professionalism	Sense of Ownership	Desire to Learn
1. Michael				X	X		X	
2. Charlotte		X			X			
3. Juliet	X	X						
4. Kate	X			X	X			X
5. Hugo	X	X	X					X
6. Claire		X					X	X
7. Jack	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
8. Ana	X			X		X		X
9. James	X				X			X
10. Shannon		X	X	X			X	
11. Libby	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
12. Rose	X	X		X		X	X	
TOTALS	8 (67%)	8 (67%)	4 (33%)	7 (58%)	5 (42%)	3 (25%)	5 (42%)	7 (58%)

Survey Quotes to Support

- "Support staff that do interact with students should provide excellent customer service to make the experience of college positive for the student."
- "Have a background in customer service."
- "We all need to be on the same page, singing the same song from the same book."
- "Absolutely, so we can work as one consistent cohesive group providing the same information college-wide."

Professional Development Programs: Desired

Name	Online / Webinars	Customer Service Training	Basic Clerical Skills	Peer Training	Cross Training	Overall College Orientation
1. Michael						
2. Charlotte					X	X
3. Juliet					X	X
4. Kate			X		X	X
5. Hugo		X				X
6. Claire	X	X		X		X
7. Jack		X		X	X	X
8. Ana	X	X		X		
9. James	X	X	X			
10. Shannon	X					X
11. Libby		X	X			X
12. Rose		X	X	X		
Totals	4 (33%)	7 (58%)	4 (33%)	4 (33%)	4 (33%)	8 (67%)

Survey Quotes to Support

- "Not classroom training, but better knowledge about what other departments do."
- "I feel that the support staff that are in direct contact with the students are very knowledgeable and helpful to our students. I feel that support staff that are not in direct contact with students during the registration period should have the opportunity to be trained so that when there is overtime, these employees could help out during the busy season. During the slow time, there should be sessions for anyone to take to learn what they would need to know to be able to work and help out the employees over at the [Enrollment Building]."

Professional Development Programs: Existing

Name	Underground Network	Tuition Waiver	Basic Computer Skills	Basic Datatel Skills
1. Michael		X		
2. Charlotte				
3. Juliet	X	X		
4. Kate	X	X		X
5. Hugo		X		
6. Claire	X			X
7. Jack	X	X		
8. Ana	X			
9. James			X	
10. Shannon	X			
11. Libby	X		X	
12. Rose	X			
TOTALS	8 (67%)	5 (42%)	2 (17%)	2 (17%)

*No applicable survey comments.

Issues with Professional Development

Name	Lack of PD Opportunities	Not Enough Time	Lack of Staff Desire	PD = Too Broad of a Concept
1. Michael	X			X
2. Charlotte	X			
3. Juliet	X			
4. Kate	X		X	X
5. Hugo	X			X
6. Claire	X		X	
7. Jack	X		X	
8. Ana	X	X		
9. James	X	X		
10. Shannon	X	X		
11. Libby	X			
12. Rose	X	X		
TOTALS	12 (100%)	4 (33%)	3 (25%)	3 (25%)

Survey Quotes to Support

- "Could be better, but I am able to do my job at a satisfactory level." (Speaking of the number of PD offerings available.)
- "In my current position I have received training. Prior positions it was not the case."
- "Any professional development for my job is done on my own time and at my own expense. I've asked to attend things but there never seems to be money available for support staff. I also assume that if I could go, as a support staff employee I'd need to use vacation or personal day to attend. Any training for support staff I recall being offered (very rarely) on campus, does not pertain to student success 0 Microsoft Excel is the last one I remember and that was at least 4-5 years ago. The most recent training at the [Enrollment Building] did not really involve me and if it was something I needed to know, I was not invited to participate."
- "MCC provides training on an extremely rare basis for all staff, but especially support staff."
- "I believe that this depends on the employee's attitude towards student success and their position at the college. Some support staff do not have great contact with students so they do not have an opportunity to help students in the same manner as support staff who work with students as a major part of their job."
- "My current position is not in direct contact with students. I do feel that employees that deal with the students daily need additional resources and training."
- "If there are professional development opportunities, which I know there are, the college never sends notices of such things."
- "Opportunities are limited but employees have the opportunity to take classes at MCC and use tuition waivers to help with costs."
- "They seem to offer opportunities after something happens or support staff asks for training."
- "Until this semester, MCC has rarely offered PD to support staff. I can count on one hand the amount of PDs that I have attended in the last 17 years of employment as a MCC support staff member."
- "Support staff are the first to be blamed and the last to be trained."
- "Not as much as I would like, but I know it is in the works." (Speaking of number of PD offerings.)
- "No such thing. Never has been."
- "Never offered."
- "I know that if the opportunity was there, my supervisor would let me do it."
- "There are none."
- "Maybe just a brochure/newsletter that explains what different campus departments do so I can better assist a student on where to go."
- "Ain't nobody got time for that!"

Institutional Issues		
Name	Marginalization of Support Staff	Lack of Cross Departmental Communication
1. Michael		
2. Charlotte	X	X
3. Juliet		X
4. Kate		X
5. Hugo	X	
6. Claire	X	
7. Jack	X	
8. Ana	X	
9. James		
10. Shannon	X	X
11. Libby		
12. Rose	X	X
TOTALS	7 (58%)	5 (42%)

Survey Quotes to Support

- "This opinion [of support staff playing an important role on campus] is unfortunately not shared by most faculty. Over 20 years experience has demonstrated that the overall feeling of the faculty union on this campus is one of pure disdain for support staff."
- "Not sure they really give it a lot of thought. The role of faculty in a student's experience at the college seems to dominate." (Speaking of institutional perception of support staff.)
- "I don't believe the leadership values the importance of support staff."
- "I know how to interact and help them [the students] succeed in a professional environment, but I do not always have accurate knowledge about how to help them with things like program tracks, financial aid, and generally who to send them to for specific assistance."
- "...Nor were any of the new procedures shared with anyone outside of the [Enrollment Building]. I could not help answer questions about what happens there even if I wanted to."
- "Again, I think we are working towards a consistent flow of information and professional development, we are not there yet."
- "MCC provides training on an extremely rare basis for all staff, but especially support staff."
- "Support staff are the first to be blamed and the last to be trained."
- "You can't work as a team if you don't know the direction the college is going."
- "The support staff at MCC is not considered to be a part of the Core Team, so it is not deemed important or necessary to work with or communicate with us. Our opinions are not considered worthy. There is so little communication between the people making the decisions and the people who actually perform the work and meet the students face-to-face it is nearly impossible to provide positive service to the students."

APPENDIX
I: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

To: Dr. Noreen Thomas and Ms. Lori Gonko
From: Dr. Stephanie Thomson, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application #131104 (Title: *The Role of Community College Support Staff in Student Success Initiatives*)
Date: January 9, 2014

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, "*The Role of Community College Support Staff in Student Success Initiatives*" (#131104) and approved it as *expedited 2F* from full committee review. This approval has an expiration date of one year from the date of this letter. As such, you may collect data according to procedures in your application until **January 9, 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 (#131104) which you should refer to in future communications involving the same research procedure.

We also wish to inform researchers that the IRB requires follow-up reports for all research protocols as mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) for using human subjects in research. We will send a one-year reminder to complete the final report or note the continuation of this study. The final-report form is available on the [IRB homepage](#). Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let us know if the IRB can be of any future assistance.