AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS INFLUENCING

PERSISTENCE AT COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You gave me the ability to comprehend and intelligently discuss what I read. You blessed me with a gift for writing. You supplied me with the energy to hold various roles at the same time as I matriculated through the doctoral program. You kept me sane. You kept me safe during my long commute. You connected me to the right people. You replenished what I used. You demonstrated love.

I am grateful for the perfect timing of God, the fervor of the Holy Spirit, and the everlasting blood of Jesus. All things are possible to me…because I believe.

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ABSTRACT

The researcher designed the mixed method study to contribute to the field of study on persistence and provide information to CSU leadership, faculty and staff that may benefit efforts to reach and retain students. A better understanding of the factors influencing persistence may become vital for funding. Some form of performance-based funding is in place in 32 states. Georgia policymakers are considering factors such as student progression and degree completion.

For the study, the researcher asked:

1. What are the reasons graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU?

2. What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend CSU?

3. Is there a relationship between the reasons students give for choosing CSU and the reasons students give for persisting at CSU?

The researcher's sample was diverse in regard to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, pre-college academic and social experiences, financial need as well as health challenges and disability. The findings were congruent with studies examining student-instituion fit inclusive of the changing demographics among college students. Additionally, the relationship between why incoming students chose CSU and the reasons graduating seniors gave for persisting at CSU supported an institutional approach to retention. The graduating seniors indicated their persistence was reinforced by successful academic and social integration at CSU. The researcher concluded that student involvement, positive or negative experiences with faculty, staff, or processes influenced the persistence of CSU students. An atmosphere of acceptance of diversity at CSU was praised as well.

Recommendations are offered for leadership, faculty, staff, and for further study to strategically retain students through degree completion with a detailed plan.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

Education, especially higher education, has traditionally served as the equalizer which transitions individuals from poverty to self-sufficiency, as the pathway a skilled worker takes to become a supervisor, and as the portal through which a nation becomes a global power (Macdonald & Stratta, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The desire to pursue higher education has not diminished; more than 20 million students are enrolled in higher education nationwide. Officials in the Department of Education indicated that postsecondary credentials are necessary for the fastest-growing job opportunities as well as the better paying ones and that information is marketed to high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In fact, inclusive of race, gender, and socioeconomic background, an overwhelming majority of high school students indicated they expect to apply to attend college (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011). Although students are enrolling in large numbers, the number of graduating students do not mirror enrollment. Among the 4700 institutions of higher education, student attrition rates fell between 30 and 50 percent (O'Keefe, 2013). The United States is in an unenviable position of having the highest rate of higher education student attrition in the industrialized world (2013). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, more than 3 million students who were enrolled in fall 2012 failed to return to any institution for fall 2013 (Fain, 2014).

The declining college persistence rates are problematic because the rates affect institutions and the national agenda (O'Keeffe, 2013). The completion of postsecondary education as well as other benchmarks along the way are linked to the "stability of institutional enrollments, institutional budgets, and public perceptions of institutional quality" (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014, p. 2). Post collegiate outcomes such as graduates securing gainful

employment are important concerns for individuals, institutions of higher learning as well as the federal government (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; Walker, & Florea, 2014). Americans who earned postsecondary credentials significantly reduce likelihoods of dependence on social services, adverse health, and incarceration (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013).

In addition to a poor image of higher education, there are considerable financial consequences for institutions, state coffers, and the nation's budget (American Institutes of Research, 2010; O'Keefe, 2013). Although government appropriations to institutions of higher education have been reduced, the United States still "spends more on higher education than any other nation in the world [which amounts to] twice as much of our wealth measured by the gross domestic product" (American Institutes of Research, 2010, p. 2). In fact, in a five-year period, students who do not complete college cost $6.2 billion in state appropriations; $1.4 billion in state grants and $1.5 billion in federal grants (American Institutes of Research, 2010). Mullin and Philippe (2011) reported that between six and eight million students who may not have otherwise been able to afford college received Pell grants to attend college from 2001-2011. However, Roderick, Nagaoka and Coca (2009) contended that while minorities and students from lower economic classes are enrolling in college, they are not graduating. Walker and Florea (2014) explored the relationship between financial aid and student outcomes and found that financial aid recipients, especially those who have received the Pell Grant have low graduation rates despite the federal government's investment in their education. O'Keefe (2013) asserted that lower persistence results in "lost revenue for the higher education institution, the subsequent misappropriation of funds from state and federal governments, the weakening of the labor markets and potential exclusion of young, low-skilled workers from employment" (pp. 611-612).

Statement of the Problem

The six-year graduation rate at Columbus State University has remained at 30% since 2005 (CSU Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2017). The void in retention and persistence studies at CSU is understanding why students persist to complete their degree at CSU. Understanding the phenomena and how to allocate personnel and resources may become vital for funding. Some form of performance-based funding is in place in 32 states (National Conference of State Legislature, 2017). Georgia is in transition and policymakers are considering the following evaluation factors for Georgia: "student progression; degrees conferred; success of low-income and adult learners; and institution specific measures to account for different missions and strategic initiatives" (National Conference of State Legislature, n.p., 2017).

Persistence and Retention

Retention rates and graduation rates are important statistics and significant concerns for higher education leaders. As the previous paragraph reflected, postsecondary outcomes affect the nation. Persistence is a term which relates to retention and graduation, but persistence pertains to student commitment to the institution semester after semester until the student earns the degree and graduates (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014). The terms persistence and retention are often used interchangeably, but persistence is student-oriented and a qualitative study can assist with developing an understanding of the factors at the institution influencing the students desire to remain enrolled (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick 2006; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Retention and graduation rates are often reported quantitatively with demographic statistics, but without the details which affected continued enrollment (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick; Roberts, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Studying persistence which is the study of why students report they remain enrolled at an institution may provide insight into the withdrawal rate when researchers

organize the responses and make inferences (DeAngelo, 2014; Kalsbeek, 2013a; 2013b; Miller & Bell, 2016; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998; Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993; 2012).

It is a daunting task to find out why students withdrew after they have left college and stopped communicating with anyone on campus. The researcher proposed a study to examine the factors influencing persistence to better understand persistence, but the study also assisted with understanding retention (Castro, 2013; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Hoover, 2015; Lightweis, 2014; Miller & Bell, 2016).

Research Questions

The researcher sought to examine the factors affecting persistence of Columbus State University students by studying the reasons incoming CSU freshmen provide for choosing to attend CSU and comparing those responses to the reasons that graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU.

The research questions were derived from the literature review of cognitive and non-cognitive issues affecting persistence in higher education as well as the strategies initiated at institutions across the country to improve student persistence.

1. What are the reasons graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU?

2. What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend CSU?

3. Is there a relationship between the reasons students give for choosing CSU and the reasons students give for persisting at CSU?
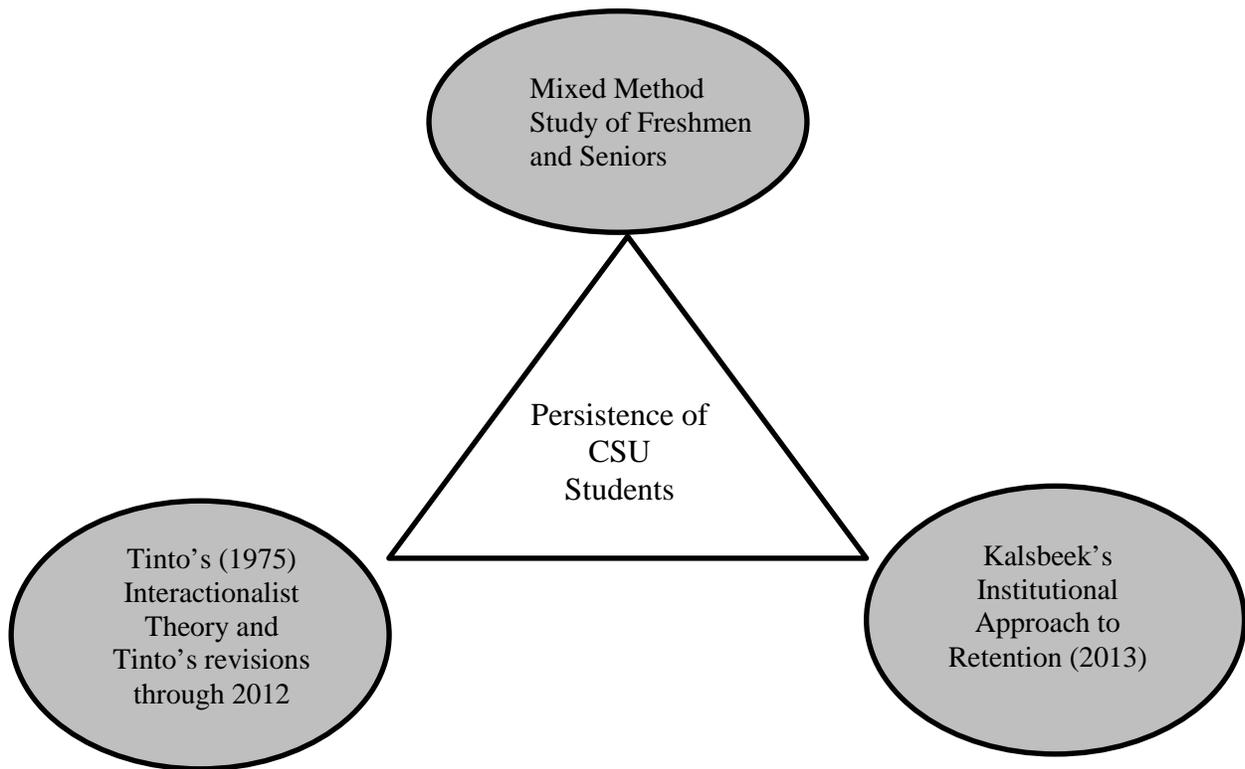
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework. This figure illustrates the researcher's intention to examine persistence factors using Tinto's Interactionalist Theory and Kalsbeek's Institutional Approach to Retention.

The researchers' conceptual framework took into account Tinto's (1975; 1987; 1993; 2012) theories. In 1975, Tinto posited the seminal theory that hundreds of researchers have used as a foundation for their own studies (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2011; Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Seidman, 2012). In his original theory, Tinto (1975) asserted students' initial commitment to institution, initial commitment to the goal of graduating were vital factors impacting whether students would persist to complete degrees and the other factors were how well students integrated academically and socially into the institution. Over time, Tinto revised his own theory, adding more dimension and in his most recent works Tinto emphasized the roles of faculty and classroom experiences concerning retention (Tinto 1993, 2012). Specifically, Tinto (2012) reasoned that the lack of improvement in graduation rates

among at-risk groups is due to the lack of integrated efforts among campus personnel. Tinto (2012) advocated institution-wide retention planning. Furthermore, Tinto asserted that retention planning should consider students, holistically. Therefore, Tinto (2012) included recommendations for curriculum and course reviews, greater accountability for instructors to provide timely and beneficial feedback to students, and increased efforts from campus personnel to encourage an environment of success as well as promote social integration among students. Kalsbeek (2013a) pointed out the problems of disjointed approaches to retention planning and extended Tinto's (2012) ideas of inclusion and crafted an institutional approach to retention. Kalsbeek (2013a) called his framework, the "4 Ps" and the "Ps" stand for profile, progress, process, and promise. According to Kalsbeek (2013a), educators typically focus initiatives and programs on students identified as highly likely to struggle or withdraw, but Kalsbeek maintained that educators should implement an institutional approach targeting overall retention and thereby absorb those who historically struggle to persist to degree completion.

The conceptual framework for the study emerged from three key ideas from Tinto and Kalsbeek (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems and (3) the institutional approach to improving retention.

The concept for the mixed methods approach to obtain the findings central to CSU students was based on the compatibility of pragmatism and constructivism. Pragmatism is associated with mixed method research and constructivism is associated with qualitative research (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Both pragmatism and constructivism involves exploring human perception and experiences for problem solving purposes, not for establishing absolute truths (Reich, Neubert, & Hickman, 2009). The researcher proposed that commonality pragmatism

shares with constructivism benefits the quantitative aspects of the chosen mixed method

approach and result in a better understanding of why CSU students persist to degree completion.

Significance of the Study

More than ten years ago, members of a CSU task force issued a report on retention,

progression, and graduation (RPG) rates. The researcher intended to reduce the gap in RPG

studies at CSU. The 2005 Task Force report:

- did not answer why students persist;

- was based largely on quantitative data;

- indicated inconclusive information requiring further study;

- recommended activities and support for freshmen, sophomores, and juniors;

- was the only RPG study on the CSU website.

At that time the members of the task force reported high retention rates from freshman-

to-sophomore year, but low graduation rates (CSU Office of Institutional Research and

Effectiveness, 2005). In the report, the task force stated that they analyzed retention and

graduation from the CSU student population over several categories to include students' gender,

ethnic origin, incoming GPA and admission scores, distance from permanent residence,

residence while enrolled at CSU, declared major, financial aid status, and first-year GPA.

Additionally, specific focus groups were held for non-traditional students and students employed

more than 19 hours. In the report, it was noted that there was better understanding about some

classifications of students, for example, students who work and students who have low incoming

GPAs, or take courses from part-time instructors. However, the task force members indicated

inconclusive information in several areas which resulted in a lack of understanding of first-to-

second year retention as well as persistence through graduation. Thus, recommendations from

the task force included focusing on supporting sophomores and juniors and assessing student engagement among sophomores and juniors to improve persistence through graduation. The 2005 report was largely based on quantitative data -- the number of students retained. In addition, only non-traditional and working students participated in the qualitative focus groups.

The researcher proposed to examine the sustaining reasons CSU students persist to degree completion. The researcher was interested in understanding the complex phenomena of the factors influencing persistence and the factors influencing retention using a sample population meant to represent the entire CSU student population. With a mixed method approach, the researcher sought to contribute to the persistence and retention scholarship and more pointedly provide information to CSU leadership, faculty and staff that may benefit efforts to reach and retain students.

The researcher's overarching research question, quantitative instrument and qualitative interview protocol was derived from literature review of cognitive and non-cognitive issues affecting persistence as well as the strategies initiated at institutions across the country to enhance student persistence. The researcher was interested in (1) adding to persistence and retention scholarship and (2) increasing institution-specific knowledge and understanding of CSU students and their campus interactions for the benefit of CSU.

Catalysts for Policy Changes in Higher Education

Retention studies date back to John McNeely, who during the 1930s, studied what was at that time called "student mortality" (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012, p.14). Eighty years of research gave rise to a number of reasons why some students persist at the same institution and complete degrees. Higher education leaders have responded with initiatives involving faculty and staff from the academic affairs and student affairs sides of the institution (Goldrick-Rab & Cook

2011; O'Keeffe, 2013; Renn & Reason, 2013; Turner, 2016). Some tasks have also enlisted accountability from administrators to monitor processes (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Hodara, Jaggars, Karp & Columbia University, 2012; Hoover, 2015; Kalsbeek, 2013a; 2013b).

In recent decades, the declining college persistence rates have become problematic and negatively affected the student, families, institutions of higher learning and the workforce (American Institutes of Research, 2010, Bok, 2013, O'Keefe (2013). Amid demands from policymakers and accreditors to demonstrate progression and degree completion, higher education leaders increased hiring or assigned committees to target enrollment management and student success initiatives (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Hoover, 2015; O'Keeffe, 2013; Miller & Bell, 2016). The response of campus leaders to policymakers and accreditors supported Zemsky (2013) who asserted that American higher education has been "impervious to change" (p. 15). Furthermore, Zemsky (2013) stated:

> My unhappy conclusion is that reform will not come to higher education until and unless the federal government becomes an active sponsor of change; in other words, the dislodging events that come to matter most will be those the federal government helps put in play (p.17).

Hence, it is not research or institution-specific problems that motivate higher education campus leaders to initiate change. Instead, it has been external forces, namely, those in charge of funding higher education institutions, which force campus leaders to change or review the research of others to initiate change on their respective campus. Performance-based accountability has been one dislodging event (McClendon & Hearn, 2013). Performance-based funding initially began in Tennessee in the 1979 due to dissatisfaction with enrollment-based funding formulas and a growing public concern over performance assessment (McLendon &

Hearn, 2013). The Tennessee model which included six factors allowed for improvement over time; the model has been replicated by several states (McLendon & Hearn, 2013). Thirty-two states now operate with some form of performance-based funding (National Conference of State Legislature, 2017). Georgia lawmakers are considering student progression and degrees conferred as two factors for performance-based funding of higher education institutions (National Conference of State Legislature, 2017). The newly-elected president, Donald Trump, will define his goals for the Department of Education (Camera, 2017). Previously, President Obama included degree completion as a priority during his administration. O'Keefe (2013) wrote "With the advent of the Obama's administration's calls to action to increase rates of degree completion and levels of baccalaureate attainment to achieve global competitiveness, the national dialogue about retention and student success has taken on a greater intensity" (p.5). In order to regain America's lead in the global community, the president suggested the number of two-and four-year degrees and certificates awarded by 2020 must rise by three and one-half to four percent per year (Bok, 2013).

However, to address persistence and retention, researchers stressed that it is important to understand the institution-specific dynamics (Flores & Park, 2013; Miller & Bell, 2016; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013; Seelman, 2014; Wolff, Himes, Soares & Miller, 2016). Watson (2013) asserted that changes in higher education require an assessment of the "relationships among interdependent components that together comprise the whole…to implement change across the entire university system including satellite campuses" (p. 44). The point being that although external factors such as demands from accreditors or waning federal dollars are catalysts for changing policies at institutions of higher education, sustained change required changing minds (Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Watson, 2013). There must be a change in "mindsets" (Watson, 2013, p.

45). Watson (2013) asserted, "For leaders and followers alike in higher education systems, understanding the internal social structure of system will be key not only to transforming it but also to promoting mindset change across the system" (p.45).

Procedures

The researcher investigated the persistence and retention of CSU students using a mixed method approach with two phases, and expected to compete the study no later than August 2017.

Phase one was quantitative and phase two was qualitative. The researcher described findings using both narratives and visual representations of statistics with the goal of providing research-based recommendations to CSU stakeholders concerned with improving graduation rates. The researcher sampled incoming freshmen and graduating students. Phase one consisted of a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire with one area for a free response to capture a reason not provided on the prewritten questionnaire. The researcher provided the questionnaire to newly-admitted freshmen participating in the CSU ROAR (Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration) program during the summer of 2017. The researcher used SPSS to analyze the phase one responses.

For phase two, the researcher asked open-ended questions to incoming freshmen and graduating seniors who participated in follow-up focus groups or in one-on-one interviews. The researcher's open-ended questions will address areas of identified from the literature review. During the focus group sessions or one-on-one interviews, the researcher recorded the responses. The transcribed responses were analyzed using NVIVO.

Limitations

The participants in the study were an "accessible population" as defined Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009). This included incoming freshmen and graduating seniors who were available between July 2017 and August 2017. Although the researcher wanted to better understand the factors affecting persistence and retention of CSU student population, the researcher only asked freshmen and graduating seniors, not sophomores and juniors. In addition, the researcher used modified snowball sampling (Trochim, 2006). The modified snowball approach involved asking members of CSU faculty and staff for assistance in recruiting participants for the study. CSU students who agreed to participate in the focus groups or interview also served as recruiters for classmates or friends. Due to these limitations, the study did not consist of a random sampling of the CSU student population.

Delimitations

The researcher relied on cluster sampling for purposive sampling which allowed the researcher to choose specific settings or groups with a likelihood of providing "depth" for the study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 174). The summer program called ROAR (Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration) afforded the researcher with access to incoming freshmen in a concentrated event. Additionally, the researcher received assistance from a faculty member teaching graduating seniors in regard to contacting graduating seniors. The purposive sampling provided an efficient use of the summer when fewer students are taking classes, and very few freshmen are on campus.

Definition of Terms

Generally, the term used are defined within the paragraph or commonly understood. The following definitions are provided for clarity. Some terms are defined in more detail within the chapters.

1. College Readiness – The term refers to students' initial preparedness for the academic rigor of coursework as well as the out-of-class responsibilities of managing time and behavior (Conley, 2008). College readiness also corresponds to the emotional and social challenges of a forming or maintaining one's identity in a new environment (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013).

2. Enrollment Management – The term refers to analyzing trends in higher education, at the respective institution and reviewing research to make projects and plan for admissions and retention challenges (Dennis, 1998).

3. Persistence – Although sometimes, used interchangeably with retention, persistence is a student-oriented term referring to students' decision to continue on the path to earn their degree. The students' commitment to continue at the same institution. (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014)

4. Retention – The term is an institutional goal and measurement. The retention rate refers to the number of students who return to the university from the previous fall (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

5. ROAR – Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration is a Columbus State University required program for newly-admitted students and parents with sessions designed to orient students and inform parents of what it expected of

students and what students should expect from their college experience at CSU

(Columbus State University, 2017).

Paradigms Guiding the Research Design

The pragmatism paradigm guided the research design. Pragmatism is most often

associated with mixed method research because pragmatism does not require sacrificing the

benefits of qualitative research or the benefits of quantitative research (Teddlie & Tashakkori,

2009.) Pragmatism allows for the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research to explain the

observations (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Qualitative research purports there is no single

reality; rather, realities are constructs of individuals based on their unique perspectives resulting

from their experiences, environments, or conditions (Lincoln & Guba 1989.) On the other hand,

quantitative research traditionally seeks to test hypotheses absent of values and analyze the

numerical data in terms of the "significant difference between groups or among variables"

(Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 5). In education studies involving curriculum design,

constructivists asserted that learners constructed meanings by attempting to make associations

with information they were learning (Cooperstein & Kocear-Wedinger, 2004; Good & Brophy

1994). Thus, new knowledge built upon previous knowledge (Cooperstein & Kocear-Wedinger,

2004; Good & Brophy 1994). Learners benefited from interactions with peers whether in

partnerships, groups, or in class discussions. Furthermore, constructivist-oriented activities

provided real-life applications to the assignment, boosting the students' abilities to exercise

induction, and construct meaning and concepts for themselves (Cooperstein & Kocear-Wedinger,

2004). Mixed methodologist use pragmatism to combine value-leaden qualitative data with the

objective quantitative components. Pragmatism allows the researcher to "test" and "explain" the

experiences of the participants of the study not for absolute truth, but for the trueness in the

context and experience of the participants in the study (Reich, Neubert, & Hickman, 2009, pp. 58-60). Furthermore, the "real-life problems, the proposed solutions, together with the instruments, tools, procedures, and productive constructions of problem solving, must eventually be tested in practical application (Reich, Neubert, & Hickman, 2009, p. 59). For the mixed method approach in the study, constructivism related to the study in that the participants, as learners, make associations from their prior knowledge and experience to construct meaningful responses. Thus, the qualitative approach helped the researcher develop a rich understanding of the multiple realities and values among CSU students affecting persistence and retention. Additionally, with the quantitative aspects of the research design, the researcher analyzed the collected data and presented a summary supporting the researcher's recommendation for improving persistence among CSU students.

Summary

The six-year graduation rate at Columbus State University has remained at 30% since 2005. The researcher sought to examine the factors affecting persistence and retention of Columbus State University students by studying the reasons incoming CSU freshmen provide for choosing to attend CSU and comparing those responses to the reasons that graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU to degree completion. The research questions were derived from literature review of cognitive and non-cognitive issues affecting persistence in higher education as well as the strategies initiated at institutions across the country to improve student persistence.   The researcher conducted a mixed methods study and described findings using both narratives and visual representations of statistics with the goal of providing recommendations to CSU leaders responsible for enrollment management.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Retention Studies

Church leaders established the first American colleges, Harvard, William and Mary, and Yale to educate and train young men to become pastors or serve as missionaries (Seidman, 2012). For decade, a college credential was not necessary for employment and young men usually found work in their hometowns in the vocations that supported their families and their communities (Seidman, 2013). Even as male college enrollment increased rapidly in the 1800s and as women began to enroll in newly-chartered women's colleges between 1850 and 1900, the most important goal during the first 250 years of higher education was remaining financially stable; postsecondary education was still not a necessity for most jobs (Geiger, 2011; Seidman, 2012). By the early 1900s, the nation had become industrialized and more than one hundred thousand students were enrolled in the nation's one thousand institutions (Geiger, 2011; Seidman, 2012). It became important to college administrators to become selective about the type of student allowed to enroll, not in attempt to ensure the student was academically prepared, but to "weed out undesirables" (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012, p. 18). For the first time, a college degree began to be widely used as a required credential for higher paying employment opportunities. However, during this time private and public junior colleges were established to serve Jewish, Catholic, and African-American students who had been denied admission and would thereby be unqualified for professional careers (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012).

Initial Studies

During the 1930s, the government officials became interested in the factors that led to attrition. The pioneering study of retention, then called "student mortality," dates back to the 1930s (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). John McNeely studied 60 institutions on behalf of the United States Department of the Interior and the Office of Education. The variables in the McNeely study were percentage of students who withdrew; time of withdrawal from the institution; average time to degree completion; size of the institution; student grades; type of student housing; student activities; student financial resources; and student characteristics such as gender and age (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). McNeely's study indicated many of the same reasons for departure are still among the challenges mentioned by students today.

The Civil Rights Movement eliminated obstacles for African Americans who sought equal opportunities for education, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided financial aid and campus support for students (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). However, student unrest due to social movements and the Vietnam War demonstrated that the ideal of students and individual characteristics needed to be considered in retention research (Berger, Ramierez, & Lyons, 2012). Thus, studies of retention in the 1960s examined issues related to the increased diversity among student populations (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

Landmark Studies

By the 1970s, Berger, Ramirez and Lyons (2012) assert there had been enough studies on retention "to construct a knowledge base that could inform retention concerns and issues" (p.18) in higher education. Seidman (2012) writes that researchers conducting the philosophical studies between 1950 and 1970 sought to predict the students who would be most successful in college, but Spady (1971) recognized that no one had assembled and organized research in such a manner

that the themes could be further studied or retention could be improved (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). Spady's 1971 study drew a connection between the characteristics of students and the college – the academics, the personnel, and fellow students (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). Spady proposed five variables indirectly affected student persistence: academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support, but that academic performance was the most significant factor influencing the student's decision to withdraw from college (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Tinto (1975) built upon Spady's (1971) sociological model and with other data regarding student retention, contributed his landmark interactionalist theory of student departure. Tinto's theory (1975) has been cited hundreds of times, and revised numerous times, which shows its significance to the body of knowledge regarding retention (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2011; Seidman, 2012). In his original 1975 theory, Tinto connected retention to academic experiences and social integration, and pointed to specific individual characteristics of students upon entry to college: students' initial commitment to the institution; initial commitment to the goal of graduating; and the level of integration into the academic and social systems of the college or university (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2011). Spady's (1971) sociological model and Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory became ideas that shaped thinking regarding the ability of students to persist and proactive or reactive initiatives could implement to address the issues (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012).

Enrollment Management

The term enrollment management was introduced in the 1980s and interest in retention continued (Chen, 2012). Tinto's (1975) model remained an influence as later researchers assisted with explaining the application of Tinto's work to their study as well as including new

populations such as graduate students (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). In the 1990s, Braxton along and with colleagues sought to assess the empirical support of Tinto's theory. Braxton (2000) wrote that their 1997 multi-institutional and single-institutional studies found less than half of Tinto's (1975) thirteen propositions held true in their study and recommended revision. Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993; 2012) continued to revise his theory to include diverse populations and the changing contexts of campuses (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014; Chen, 2012).

In the last two decades as the nation experienced economic turmoil and sought ways to recover, purse strings as well as scrutiny tightened for higher education (Kalsbeek, 2013, O'Keefe, 2013; Walker & Florea, 2014). As a result, stakeholders nationwide including policymakers and higher education administrators, put a spotlight on retention and persistence due to the extent to which graduation rates affected the labor force, the financial aid system as 6well as criteria important to colleges and universities: institutional effectiveness, reputation and rankings (Kalsbeek, 2013; Renn & Reason, 2013; Shaw & Mattern, 2013). Retention remained a common challenge among the nation's institutions of higher education with innumerable committees assigned to resolve the issue campus by campus (Kalsbeek, 2013). Solving the "departure puzzle" as Braxton (2000. p.1) referred to it in his book required deconstructing the phenomenon by determining the underlying causes of students' decision to drop out of college and reviewing the empirical studies associated with those factors (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2013).

Lasting Influence of Tinto

Generally, researchers found that Tinto's 1996 work identified at least seven factors related to retention: academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, uncertainty, narrow or new goals, external commitment, financial concerns, lack of student-institution fit, and isolation from

campus life (DeAngelo, 2014). Some institutions of higher education invested in software or

design their own programs to perform predictive analytics. The software or programs organized

data and allowed users to extract information based on academic and non-academic categories to

forecast the likelihood of student success or failure (Hoover, 2015; Miller & Bell, 2016).

Predictive analytics and data mining were terms associated with business industry and involved

collecting and sorting data to assist companies with marketing and tailoring products for

consumers. In the same way, proponents of predictive analytics and data mining aimed to

improve student retention through tailored interventions (Hoover, 2015; Miller &Bell, 2016).

Colleges and universities implementing predictive analytic models and data mining initiatives

assigned ad hoc retention task forces, offices of Institutional Effectiveness, or external consulting

groups to capture predictive metrics beyond single entrance exam scores to include high school

grade point averages in specific courses as well as qualitative responses to questions geared to

evaluate mental health and coping skills (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Hoover, 2015; Miller &

Bell, 2016). While the majority of retention goals were traditionally based on quantitative

benchmarks such as placement scores, some data mining was purely qualitative and others were

based on mixed methods designs consisting of quantifying qualitative approaches such as

interviews (Castro, 2013; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Hoover, 2015; Lightweis, 2014; Miller & Bell,

2016).

Modern researchers agreed that general and underlying causes that led to the dropout

statistics in education varied by student, but the types of students who were likely to drop out of

college included ethnic minorities; students who were academically disadvantaged; students with

disabilities; students from lower socioeconomic classes; and probationary students (Rigali-Olier

& Kurpius, 2013; Watson, 2013). Many of these students were unready for college due to a

number of factors working against them: to include being products of failing primary and secondary schools; products of parents who did not attend college; and products of environments in which preparing for higher education was not prioritized (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Conley, 2008; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Environmental factors and an individual's personal interactions within family and within social relationships influenced student cognition, emotions and behavior, and thus prepared or under-prepared them for college (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013). Reports indicated that nearly thirty to forty percent of first-time undergraduate students needed at least one remedial course, but among community college students, fifty percent of students were enrolled in at least one remedial course (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Students taking those remedial classes at two-year colleges were primarily minorities and students receiving Pell Grants (Complete College America, 2016).

Cognitive Issues and College Readiness

The initial level of college preparation students had upon entry was a factor that influences their success (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Crisp and Delgado, 2014; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). A leading expert on college readiness, David Conley, defined college readiness "as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program" (Conley, 2008, p. 24). Conley (2008) categorized college readiness skills as: cognitive strategies which include analytical and reasoning skills; content knowledge defined as a knowledge base of key content areas; academic behaviors such as self-awareness and time management; and contextual skills and knowledge described as the knowledge and understanding of the college application

and admissions process. While Castro (2013) respected Conley's theories, she asserted that Conley's ideas did not accurately account for "structural barriers" linked to race and class that have denied proper academic opportunities to students, and the denials had to not only be noted as a factor, but also addressed (Castro, 2013, para. 2).

Correspondingly, researchers asserted that lack of preparedness for the emotional and social challenges of higher education was heightened among non-whites; first-generation; and poorer students (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013). The family home environment was beneficial or detrimental to a student's decision and ability to apply, attend, and complete college (Leonard, 2013). Cates and Schaefle (2011) who studied Latino students, used the term "cultural capital" coined by French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Boudier (p. 322), and contended successful matriculation depended on academic skills as well as behavior and coping techniques. In addition to the family home culture, the external environment at school, neighborhood, and in the surrounding community contributed to college readiness (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012). Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong (2012) asserted that young people will thrive in environments "rich in resources and structures" promoting college readiness (p. 29). Accordingly, young people failed to acquire the knowledge and skills in K-12 classes in which students experienced inconsistent academic and college counseling sometimes related to the students' demographics (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Flores & Park, 2013).

The No Child Left Behind Public Law of 2001 was enacted with the mission to improve Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 through the creation of absolute benchmarks and prescribed penalties for schools not meeting adequate yearly academic progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Academic preparation in the K-12 system remained a

paramount concern for the federal government; however, under President Obama state public school system administrators were allowed to use provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that free them from No Child Left Behind guidelines, allowing them opportunity to hold instructors and students accountable to different learning outcome plans designed by their state's education leaders (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Forty-one states including Alabama and Georgia, were approved for waivers to pursue comprehensive plans of their own. Georgia's education reform plan was called Georgia's Annual School, District, and State Accountability System, the Alabama plan was called Plan 2020 (Georgia Department of Education, 2016; Alabama State Department of Education, 2016). P12 and higher education were not integrated. Therefore, colleges and universities receive students with varying learning experiences – an immutable fact for higher education (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014; Flores & Park, 2013).

Strategies Addressing Cognitive Issues

Remedial Classes.

In terms of strategies to address the phenomena of retention, offering remedial courses (currently called developmental or learning support at many institutions) became an early strategy for students who were not ready for the academic rigor of college (Brothen & Wambach, 2012) once more underprepared students began attending college. A boon in college enrollment occurred in the 1950s and 1960s due to federal funding for postsecondary education in the forms of the GI BILL, National Defense Education Act of 1958, and the Higher Education Act of 1965. These legislative acts resulted in an influx of students from middle and lower income families, diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and varying learning experiences (Seidman, 2012). While admission criteria were somewhat selective, four-year institutions of higher education had the discretion of allowing students to be admitted with provisional status and provided those students

with remedial courses (Brothen & Wambach, 2012). In addition, the two-year junior colleges with open admissions were more prevalent between 1950 and 1970, offering academic or vocational preparation to benefit the student in two years rather than four years leading to a job in the community in which they already lived (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; NCES, 2016; Seidman, 2012;).

The open-admission two-year institution continued to serve as the main gateway to postsecondary credentials for students who did not meet the admissions requirements for four-year institutions (Hodara, Jaggars, Karp & Columbia University, 2012; Mullin & Philippe, 2013). Students who could not meet the admission standards of four-year institutions of higher learning often enrolled at community colleges and technical colleges where remedial classes in reading, English, and math were available (Flores and Park, 2013; Hodara, Jaggars, Karp & Columbia University, 2012). In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 50 percent of students enrolled at an open-admission or minimally-selective four-year institution took remedial courses (2016). More than 60 percent of African-American and Latino students took a remedial course in college compared to 36 percent of white students, and 63 percent of low-income students took development courses compared with 25 percent of students from the highest income bracket (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Typically, students were required or highly-encouraged to take and successfully complete remedial classes based on the scores they received on a placement test. The remedial courses were non-credit, but not tuition-free classes in reading, writing, and math; typically, the classes were one semester in length (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011).

There was data to support that remedial education was effective, and there was data indicating remedial classes were ineffective, so the debate continued (Brothen & Wambach,

2012). Critics stated students forced to take remedial courses experienced discouragement because they do not receive college credit for courses and students believed the classes were inconsistent with their goals (Brothen & Wambach, 2012). Crisp and Delgado (2014) found a negative relationship between remedial classes and retention or transfer from two-year institutions to four-year institutions. In contrast, proponents of remedial programs touted the benefits of students developing their reading, writing, math and study skills to apply them to advanced courses and degree completion although the proponents admitted that remedial classes had inconsistent success (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014; Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Inconsistent success and pressures of accountability for student outcomes from the government as well as accrediting bodies pushed administrators to admonish faculty or staff administrators to evaluate the effectiveness of remedial courses on their own campuses, and implement their own initiatives (Brothen & Wambach, 2012). Initiatives included modifying the curriculum in remedial courses, allowing students to take the remedial course and the freshman level course of the same subject simultaneously, or making the remedial course disappear by integrating the remedial skills into the freshmen level course (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011 and Brothen &Wambach, 2012).

The long-running disagreements over remedial education and whether all students should have the opportunity for a college education spawned another approach to studying remedial instruction, which was reviewing best practices of remedial instruction and remedial programs instead of seeking to prove whether remedial instruction should be eliminated (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014; Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Brothen and Wambach (2012) posited six principles for effective remedial programs: commitment from faculty; knowledgeable faculty in the subject matter; consideration of non-cognitive factors

affecting students; appropriate learning environment, high standards for students; regular evaluation of remedial programs and the success of faculty with students in remedial programs.

Furthermore, Rutschow & Schneider (2011) provided a literature review of strategies related to remediation and the authors categorized efforts into four areas: pre-College interventions; accelerated remedial education opportunities; contextualized basic skills within occupational or college-content coursework; and additional academic support such as advising or tutoring. However, the common denominator for most institutions of higher education was that placement tests were the instruments used to classify students (Brothen &Wambach, 2012; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Researchers asserted that the types and quality of placement tests should also be considered as consider reforming their campus approach to remedial courses (Brothen &Wambach, 2012 Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). In one particular study of open enrollment colleges, Hodara, Jaggars, Karp & Columbia University (2012) indicated open enrollment colleges have erred by focusing singularly on assessments and cut scores, and other indicators of academic proficiency should be used.

Tutoring.

Another common strategy among colleges and universities was tutoring. Students often attended classes that were largely lecture-based with little opportunity to engage with classmates; reviewing the lesson with tutors provided opportunities for clarification of concepts from class, problem-solving ability, and immediate feedback (Neel & Grindem, 2011). Some tutoring programs operated with hired staff who worked in a center together and provided tutoring in different subject areas (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Other tutoring programs operated with peer tutors, students who were recommended by faculty to serve as extensions of the faculty and re-state classroom content (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Some faculty voluntarily used their

office hours to provide one-on-one tutoring to students in order to improve academic

achievement (Brothen &Wambach, 2012; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

Tutoring programs had mixed results due to the number of variables including learning

challenges of student seeking tutoring services; internal motivation of students seeking tutoring

services; as well as the level of preparation of tutors who were not faculty receive to assist

students with learning content (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). In addition, when tutoring co-

mingled with other interventions such as success courses or workshops, it was difficult to

determine the effect of tutoring alone (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Researchers purported out-

of-class academic support was one of the most effective tools to improve student success, but

academic support had to be intentionally designed, include specific objectives, and use

appropriate assessment strategies (Ellertson &Thoennes, 2007; Brothen & Wambach, 2012;

Shaw and Matter, 2013). Rutschow and Schneider (2011) found tutor programs were effectively

measured if tutor supervisors provide standardized training.

Non-Cognitive Issues

College preparedness was not only about cognitive skills. The volume of research on

retention over the past seventy years underscoring the fact that academic support nor any other

singular approach did not resolve student retention (Braxton, Doyle & Hartley, 2014). Crisp and

Delgado (2014) indicated a need to analyze the results of students with similar admissions

criteria who did not take remedial courses yet completed freshmen level courses successfully, in

order to uncover the other factors at work for or against students with similar placement scores.

Moreover, Brothen and Wambach (2012) asserted it was difficult to justify the use of one

instrument to determine placement as a single instrument excluded other pertinent information.

Successful matriculation depended also on non-cognitive skills such as study skills, behavior,

self-esteem, self-efficacy, the ability to manage stress and coping techniques. (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013).

Race and Culture Issues

Racial or ethnic minorities, abbreviated REM in Rigali-Oiler & Kurpis' study (2013, p. 198) found that REM students can feel "marginalized" at predominantly White universities. Furthermore, Rigali-Oiler and Kurpis (2013) connected Tinto's interactionalist propositions to REM students in regard to adjustment to college. Rigali-Oiler and Kurpis (2013) found "self-esteem" and "self-efficacy," an individual's own belief that he or she can succeed in college, are strong predictors to whether REM students will persist (p. 199). A Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity was developed in 1997 with three core qualities – centrality, ideology and regard – to measure the self-concept of African American college students (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998). The core qualities of centrality referred to the degree to which the respondent believed race or ethnicity was central to identity and part of his or her self-concept while the ideology component referred to the respondent's feelings about typical behavior of his or her race or ethnic group (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998). Regard had two components: private and public. Private regard referred to the positive or negative feelings toward his or her own race or ethnic group and public regard referred to what the individual believed others thought about the respondents' race (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998). A 2005 study extended the aspects of centrality and regard to European American, Latinos, African-Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans (Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). In both the 2005, REM students indicated centrality was a significant factor of their identity than European Americans; whereas European Americans indicated public regard was more important (Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). The findings supported that European Americans had at least one less concern as new students on predominantly white campuses (Rigali-Olier & Kurpius,

2013).   However, REM students considered dropping out based on how supportive the campus was and their ability to cope (Renn & Reason, 2013). Adapting to change was a heightened challenge for REM students new to the United States (McGarvey, Brugha, Conroy, Clarke & Byrne, 2015). Acculturation described the changes which occurred when two or more cultures interacted (Berry, 2004.) International students often encountered significant stress by taking courses in a foreign country, depending on the individual's personal ability to socially integrate and handle emotions (McGarvey, Brugha, Conroy, Clarke & Byrne, 2015).

Religious Issues

Diversity among the student population included students who followed different faiths as well as students who did not align themselves with any religion. A 2012 study of a broad group of students found that Protestants were more satisfied than minority religious groups and atheists in college (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks resulting in nearly three thousand deaths in New York City, Washington, DC, and Shanksville, Pennsyslvania, anti-Muslim sentiments swelled (Shammas, 2015). The 2013 Boston Marathon bombing by two young Muslim men who were naturalized American citizens, attended high school and college in the United States, and had lived as "ordinary American boys" for years drew upon fears of homegrown radicals (Finn, Leonning & Englund, 2013, p. 4; Shammas, 2015). Since 2013, there have been attacks in San Bernardino, California and Orlando, Florida, by Muslims born in the United States. In surveys conducted in 2007 and 2014 by the Arab American Institute, researchers found young Arab and Muslim Americans of traditional college age ranges reporting high rates of discrimination. In addition, the Arab American Institute and Pew Research Center surveys found that Muslims (non-Arab and Arab Muslims) garnered the lowest favorable ratings compared to other races, ethnic groups and Christians (Patel & Giess, 2015; Shammas, 2015). From 2004 to 2014, the New York Police Department categorized

individuals by religion and monitored Muslim American communities and Muslim student

organizations without any concrete evidence of links to terrorism (Shammas, 2015). As some

institutions of higher education provided opportunities for non-Christian believers to freely

exercise their faith on campus, some accommodations led to fierce offense from Christians (Patel

& Giess, 2015). At one American campus, a Christian minister and Muslim students received

negative responses from offended students for suggesting removing the pews for stackable chairs

in the campus chapel to allow for believers of different faiths to position the chairs according to

their worship traditions (Patel & Giess, 2015).   At another campus, Muslims received

permission to use the bell tower of the campus chapel to signal their prayer time, but the move

spawned significant protests and invoked the narrative of the university officials standing in

agreement with Muslims whose followers were guilty of "raping, butchering, and beheading

Christians, Jews and anyone who [didn't] submit to their Sharia Islamic law" (Patel & Giess,

2015, p. 5). Due to political correctness, liberal views, accommodations for other non-Christian

faiths, and social movements that promoted tolerance of behavior viewed as sins in the Christian

faith, some Christian college students felt restricted to exercise their Christian beliefs (Affolter,

2013; Patel & Giess, 2015; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). Violent actions by

fervent or radical believers, nationally and internationally, triggered emotions among individuals

including college students which could be appropriately channeled through "cross-ethnic and

cross-faith" curriculum or campus-sponsored programs (Shammas, 2015, p. 83).

Gender Issues

In addition to racial, cultural, and religious identification, many students within the population classified themselves differently in terms of sexual identity, gender identity, and gender expression (Renn & Reason, 2013). Terms included lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer/questioning and transgender and transsexual (Seelman, 2014; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). Students were openly or privately homosexual or bisexual which referred to whom they preferred sexually, but students could classify themselves based on the way they wanted to present themselves (Seelman, 2014). This was gender identity or gender expression to which students considered themselves as feminine, masculine, transmasculine, transfeminine, or transgender (Renn & Reason, 2013; Seelman, 2014). Wolff, Himes, Soares, and Miller Kwon (2016) found that seventeen percent of students in their study discussed having gender reassignment surgery.

Students who identified or expressed themselves other than what were traditional male and female characteristics and behaviors experienced verbal insults and threats, sexual harassment, physical assaults as well as rejection (Seelman, 2014; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). Safety and the comfort level of students in regard to housing, restrooms, and locker rooms were additional concerns when students had various ways of identifying and expressing themselves (Seelman, 2014). Some students witnessing negative consequences suffered by students who shared their sexual or gender identity in public chose to pretend to be heterosexual and expressed themselves in accordance with traditional mannerisms and dress (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). Pretending led to feelings of detachment and lower satisfactions with the college experience (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). Lower academic achievement and increased likelihood of suicide risk were additional possible outcomes (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016).

Health Issues

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) increased opportunities for individuals with disabilities to attend college (Renn & Reason, 2013). Students covered by ADA included those with visible impairments such as conditions requiring use of a cane, wheelchair, or seeing-eye dog; or invisible impairments such as mental health conditions or learning disabilities (Renn & Reason, 2013; Leake & Stodden, 2014). According to a survey of college counselors, ninety percent of college counselors reported an increase in the number of students seeking counseling for mental health issues and the college counselors reported an increase in the number of students indicating they have prescriptions for psychiatric medication (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011). Additionally, many students were veterans of military conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Iraq among other battles, and some veterans enrolled in college were challenged by stress or diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (Renn and Reason, 2013). Posttraumatic stress disorder was also associated with victims of sexual assault (Boyraz, Granda, Baker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016).   Students entering college with distress associated with a history of traumatic events as well as students who experienced a traumatic event during the first year of college were at increased risk for academic difficulties and withdrawal from college (Boyraz, Granda, Baker, Tidwell, & Waits, 20160.

First-Generation College Students

As the first members of their families to attend college, first generation college students faced challenges with persistence because their parents could not relate or communicate with them regarding college adjustment issues (Lightweis, 2014; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). A weak or non-existent family support system while first generation college students learned college processes could overwhelm first generation students as they attempted to balance commitments with expectations (Swecker, Fifolt, & Seabry, 2013). Additionally, some first-

generation students felt self-conscious about asking questions or seeking assistance from peers or campus personnel (Lightweis, 2014).

Furthermore, Goldrick-Rab and Cook (2011) found that particularly in Hispanic families, students were encouraged to live at home. Living at home complicated the ability of students to acclimate to college in that parents expected the college student to assist with chores, care for family members, and maintain their routines of coming home after school (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011). Students who commuted often had less time to participate in study groups or participate in campus events (Lightweis, 2014). First-generation students benefited from residential colleges, which required students to live on campus and provided opportunities for social interaction (Lightweis, 2014).

Time and Money Issues

Balancing time and financial challenges were factors for students with families of their own. Goldrick-Rab and Cook (2011) found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to have begun a family during high school and that more than 13 percent of undergraduate students were single parents. Another percentage of students were adult learners who were older than 25, often parents, and often married (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Renn & Reason, 2013).

Strategies Addressing Non-Cognitive Issues

Special Focus on First-Year Students.

In 1972, John Gardner launched "University 101," a three-credit elective for freshmen at the University of South Carolina offering assignments to develop study habits and computer skills, improve writing and speaking skills as well as educating them on campus policies and processes (Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroeder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005; Roach, 1998). Some form of Gardner's innovative idea existed at two-year and four-year institutions of higher education nationwide (2005). According to the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition report, first-year experience courses or programs were a requirement for all freshmen at more than fifty-percent of four-year institutions of higher education. The report also stated that when the first-year experience was not required for all first-year students, it was often required for students taking developmental courses (Young & Hopp, 2014).

The impact of first-year experiences was examined by numerous stakeholders including the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, the What Works Clearinghouse contracted by the United States Department of Education, the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Education, the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Achieving the Dream (Bers & Younger 2014). Authors of the respective reports indicated positive impacts on academic achievement, social relationships, adaptation to college, and awareness of college processes (Bers & Younger, 2014).

However, DeAngelo (2014) asserted that most studies on first-year experience were broad and the main goal of the study was to provide the percentage of students who returned for the second year of college, but researchers were not capturing the actual impact of the first-year experience curriculum on the successful behaviors which helped students persist. DeAngelo

(2014) asked what effect first-year experiences had inside and outside of the classroom in regard to the intent of students to persist at the same college for the second year. DeAngelo (2014) found that the most significant factor in whether students persisted for the second year was academic discussion between students outside of the classroom. DeAngelo (2014) contended that developers of first-year experiences should encourage student engagement and intervene with students who were not engaging with other students as they were among the group likely to withdraw from college (2014). A secondary finding from DeAngelo's study was out-of-class engagement among faculty and students. Turner (2016) concurred that students in the study tended to persist if they had developed social relationships with each other. With academic success, four factors made a difference: overt helpfulness from faculty, one-on-one meetings with faculty, faculty familiarity with student by name or facial recognition, and accessibility of faculty in person, by phone, or by email (Turner, 2016). O'Keeffe (2013) asserted that relationships between students and even one key figure within the university could convince a student to remain enrolled. He also contended it was not sufficient for an institution to admit students and expect students to adapt without support.

Shoring up Counseling Staff.

The number of reasons that students needed someone to listen to them and refer them to support groups or highly-trained professionals abound (Goldrick-Rab & Cook 2011; Renn and Reason, 2013). Student population characteristics and identity challenges were among them and to that end, administrators at institutions of higher learning committed to hiring counselors (Watson, 2013). Rigali-Olier and Kupris (2013) concluded, "Counselors on a university campus are in a unique position to advocate and create a positive environment that fosters positive self-esteem and academic self-efficacy while respecting individual differences" (p. 208). The American Counseling Association and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related

Educational Program both expected college counselors to complete training in neutralizing

environments where biases and discrimination reduced students' comfort level in college (Smith

and Okech, 2016). O'Keefe (2013) asserted that challenges with student attrition continued when

institutions failed to build "positive relationships" and fostered a "sense of belonging" for its

students, and "[f]urthermore, a poor reflection upon colleges and universities [was] the fact that

students with disabilities, students experiencing mental health challenges and students from

ethnic backgrounds" were amid the group who will likely feel rejected and unable to develop a

sense of belonging (O'Keefe, 2013, pp. 609-612). Students identifying or expressing themselves

in an alternate way sought "college counseling services, and reported significantly higher

amounts of depressive symptoms, social anxiety, and eating concerns than their heterosexual

peers" and increased likelihood for suicide attempts (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon,

2016, p. 201).

Identity formation and moral identity were factors in decision making, commitments,

intrinsic motivation, and risk behavior (Hardy, Francis, Zamboanga, Kim, Anderson & Forthun,

2013). Thus, identity and morals affected mental health and psychological well-being in regard

to lower or higher negative outcomes such as anxiety and depression due to the activities people

tended to engage in or avoid (Hardy, et al., 2013). For example, the engagement in or avoidance

of alcohol or drugs, engagement in or avoidance of unprotected sex, or even the tendency to be

honest or dishonest were behaviors that may influence mental health and psychological well-

being (Hardy et al, 2013). However, some negative outcomes were unforeseen or

uncontrollable. Charles Snyder studied the connection between hope against negative life events

and found that people who experienced negative life events demonstrated symptoms of

depression and lost the ability to focus on goals (Chang, Yu, Jilani, Fowler, Yu, Lin, & Hirsch,

2015). Chang, et al., (2015) applied the hope theory to suicide risk among college students who suffered sexual assault. They found that hope was diminished by life events and led to higher risk of suicide. Students who entered college with significant distress due to traumatic events or suffered a trauma during the first year of college were high risk for academic difficulty often felt pessimistic and fell into self-blame to the degree that the feelings interfered with daily concentration for academic tasks and nightly rest (Boyraz, Granda, Baker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016). Watson (2013) found that counselors served as a significant force in retaining students by encouraging students and reducing anxiety.

Proactive Outreach to Students.

Some students sought assistance while other were reluctant (O'Keefe, 2013). First generation students might not be able to discuss their academic achievements or failures or the steps toward goals with anyone in their immediate family (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Lightweis, 2014). Thus, first-generation students relied on faculty and other campus employees for information (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). Proactive outreach to establish rapport with students lessened the burden on students who found difficulty finding answers or might be reluctant to seek help (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013; Lightweis, 2014). A study on white first-generation college students found that first-generation white students associated a negative feeling with seeking additional help; they felt the need for assistance meant they were not capable of college success (Lightweis, 2014). Intentionally-designed programs for first-generation students offering academic advising and mentoring were found to reduce self-defeating thoughts about college support service and improve retention (Lightweis, 2014).

Hoover (2015) found that collaborations consisting of faculty, staff, and coaches working together to submit online reports about students in reference to attendance, grades, or personal challenges such as a death in the family resulted in success. The alerts were routed to a Student

Affairs professional who contacted students with 24 hours (Hoover, 2015). Assigning mentors to at-risk students for regular communication resulted in improved retention (Lightweis, 2014; Hoover, 2015). Modern student services professionals had to be knowledgeable about various challenges for the modern student ranging from traditional matters such as admissions, housing and campus organizations to tackling the varying needs of students resulting from evolutions in society and law to include racial, cultural, gender, financial and mental health issues as well as accommodations for disabilities, resources for substance abuse, guidance for sexual harassment complaints, and proper responses for sexual assault and campus crises (McClellan & Stringer, 2016).

Organizational Change: Framing Retention as an Institutional Goal.

Although many of the aforementioned strategies to address non-cognitive factors, traditionally, had been aligned with student affairs professionals, integrating responsibilities of academic affairs personnel and student affairs personnel resulted in a focused effort toward goals, streamlined services for students, and professional development for campus personnel (Goldrick-Rab & Cook 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a; Ozaki & Hornak, 2014). Furthermore, Kalsbeek (2013a) argued for going beyond partnerships on certain aspects of retention, but for full embrace of a comprehensive plan that organized the entire institutional around retention and degree completion. Goldrick-Rab and Cook (2011) asserted that the diversity of contemporary students required administrators to develop plans which incorporate cognitive, social, and psychological processes to adequately serve students. Addressing retention as an organization meant open discussions about the ways in which curriculum challenged students in terms of degree completion (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011; Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Kaslbeek, 2013a; Zemsky, 2013). Challenges included review remedial course, courses with high failure rates, and unavailability of required courses (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011; Brothen & Wambach,

2012; Kaslbeek, 2013a; Zemsky, 2013). Approaches piloted at institutions across the country included employing course redesign committees, offering three-year baccalaureate degrees, using learning management systems for high enrollment courses, and allowing students to demonstrate mastery and exit courses at their own pace which allowed instructors to focus on instructing the students who needed them most (Zemksy, 2013). Instruction and communication strategies of faculty were factors affecting student learning (Brothen & Wambach, 2012). According to Bok (2013), many in higher education "never had training in pedagogy and are unacquainted with the research comparing lecturing with other more active ways of teaching and learning" (p. 189). Additionally, most academic leaders were these same untrained instructors who over time were promoted to dean or provost. Instructors tend to "emulate" their own professors (Bok, 2013, p. 190). Ensuring quality instruction was important (Brothen & Wambach, 2012). Faculty should be subject matter experts in the individual discipline and experts in the "cognitive process that promote learning their discipline" (Zemsky, 2013, p.120).

Due to the interdependence of people and organizations, the long-term success of an organization relied on the relationships among members as well as stakeholders; the processes used to achieve goals; the ability to respond to change; and the management of resources (Hellreigel & Slocum, Jr., 2011). Organizational theory provided colleges and universities with a framework for understanding how to implement change, assess strategies, and adjust interventions to suit the unique population of the respective institutions (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Chen, 2012). The findings were valuable for policy review, specifically for procedural changes at the institutional level (Chen, 2012). Daily, Bishop, and Patrick contended that the study of organizational theory has "strong implications for the academic environment" (2013, p. 9). An apparent application of organizational theory to academic settings was motivating

administrators and subordinates to contribute their best efforts to the organizations. In addition, institutional approaches increased likelihood of seamless service to students, expressed to students that campus personnel could be held accountable across units, and built comfort for students despite race, ethnicity, religion, or gender expression (Kalsbeek, 2013a; Rigali-Oiler, & Kurpius, 2013; Seelman, 2014; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). David, Bishop, and Patrick (2013) also posited that professional commitment studies could extend to the students. Persistence among students improved when students accepted the values of the organization as has been the case with employees who connected their individual success with the success of the organization (David, Bishop, & Patrick, 2013).

Zemsky asserted American higher education had been "impervious to change" (2013 p. 15), but that "change might yet come" (p.15) if the campus worked in harmony. Although Zemsky's writing was faculty-centered, he made the point of the importance of unified approaches. Listed first in Zemsky's checklist for reform higher education was faculty relearning the importance of collective action. According to Zemsky resolving the challenges in higher education did not come when people were using the phrases "my money," "my students," or "my research" (p.173). Instead, educators needed to work cohesively and share resources, strategies, and especially ideas.

Theoretical Frameworks

The frameworks underpinning the study are the interactionalist theory of Vincent Tinto, and the institutional approach to improving retention promoted by David H. Kalsbeek. The emerging prongs are: (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems (3) the institutional approach to improving retention.

Tinto Interactionalist Theory

The researchers' conceptual framework took into account Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993, and 2012) theories, which included two of the researcher's prongs: (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, and (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems.

Tinto's (1975) theory linked retention to the students' commitment to the institution, commitment to graduating, and the degree to which the student integrated within the academic and social environment of the institution (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011). Like Spady (1970), Tinto used Durkheim's (1961) suicide theory as a basis for his study but unlike Spady, Tinto linked cost-benefit economics concepts as an additional conceptual framework for the study (Tinto, 1975). The cost-benefit concepts included in Tinto (1975) explained that students evaluated the cost and benefit of remaining in college based on cumulative interactions while enrolled. The inclusion of the cost-benefit concept was meant to distinguish Tinto's study from Spady's study in that Tinto sought to produce a study with predictive value to assist institutions with researched-based support for strategies to prevent student dropouts (Tinto, 1975). Durkheim found that individuals were more likely to commit suicide when they failed to integrate themselves into society by holding vastly different values or inability to make personal connections, and Tinto posited that his study would produce similar findings (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto presumed that insufficient social integration into college would reduce student commitment to the college and thereby increase the likelihood of withdrawal (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) indicated peer-group associations outweighed extracurricular and social interactions with faculty although all were significant to increasing the level of commitment students would have to an institution. In addition, Tinto (1975) proposed that aspects of the campus itself such as resources, facilities and the demographics of personnel served to promote or restrict academic and social integration.

Tinto emphasized that academic performance is central to remaining enrolled; students who have socially integrated but have poor grades would also not return the following semester having been dismissed (Tinto, 1975). Therefore, academic integration was also a significant factor (Tinto, 1975). In addition, Tinto asserted that individual or unique characteristics to include social status, high school academic performance, gender, "ability," race, ethnicity, "but also expectations and motivational attributes of individuals (such as those measured by career and educational expectations and levels of motivation for academic achievement)" were important considerations in any study seeking to explain why students leave college (Tinto, 1975, p. 93). Tinto's seminal work delineated characteristics that remain influential factors for many students forty years later.

Tinto's (1975) theory linked individual characteristics to commitments. The characteristics and commitments influenced the degree to which students interacted with the academic and social environment to include experiences with faculty and peers. The interactions influenced grades and students' adjustment to college life. The feedback of grades and positive or negative adjustment experiences affected whether students further developed their academic and social integration and eventually determined whether the student would drop out of college

(Tinto, 1975). Overall, Tinto (1975) posited that despite sufficient integration into the academic and social college environment, students who were committed to completing college were less likely to withdraw voluntarily from college. However, students who had not sufficiently integrated were more likely to withdraw from that institution. Thus, based on Tinto (1975), it would have behooved administrators in the 1970s to explore Tinto's model to avoid losing students through transfers.

Although Tinto's theory (1975) purported social integration as the most significant factor determining whether students will drop out of college, Tinto's narrative also mentions factors that are inextricable to or correlated to student persistence such as individual student characteristics as well as unique characteristics of the institution. Accordingly, Tinto (1975) has been supported, refuted, and revised many times even by Tinto himself, demonstrating the dynamics of understanding student behavior in regard to retention and the complexity of developing effective strategies to improve retention. In Tinto's (1987) revision, he provided much more discussion on the individual characteristics and diversity among student populations. He wrote, "we have also painted a picture of first-time enrollments which has tended to be racially, socially, and intellectually more selective than is actually the case," (Tinto, 1987, p. 14).

Tinto's (1987) strategies included ensuring that students have adequate resources to acquire the academic skills necessary to progress in college and ensuring students receive proactive personal contact from campus personnel to "bond" and create "healthy communities" (p. 139). Additionally, Tinto asserted that administrators plan retention strategies to be student-centered; time-sensitive; reflective of the academic and social interactions likely to influence students' college experience; and linked to students' mastery of academic skills (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto's 1993 work reflected the changing demographics of student populations, applying his theory to include minorities, commuters, and "adults" which Tinto defined as students who were twenty-five years old and older" (p.10). Tinto's expanded theory also contended that classroom experiences affected retention. Tinto admitted that by including the classroom "in the process of student persistence [he was] correcting an imbalance in previous theory that attrition is largely reflective of what goes on outside of the classroom and therefore a matter for student affairs" (p. x). To improve retention, Tinto proposed academic enhancement and social integration programs targeting specific groups who have been statistically identified as having high likelihood of dropping out based upon his research and upon the research of others studying retention (Tinto, 1993).

More recently, Tinto (2012) summarized his life's work of studying retention, contending that students who statistically are less likely to graduate, namely students from low socioeconomic classes and minority students, are still less likely to graduate despite the efforts of campus personnel. Tinto (2012) reasoned that the lack of improvement in graduation rates among at-risk groups is due to lack of awareness of types of practices campus personnel should adopt. Additionally, Tinto (2012) asserted that changes to classroom instruction have largely been ignored. Tinto's (2012) work explained academic and social integration within contexts of urging campus personnel to create thoughtful plans that delineate the clear expectations for students, faculty and staff; plans that include support programs; plans that include relevant course assessment and frequent feedback so students will know where they stand; and plans that foster interaction among students and campus personnel to create a climate of success. In 2012, Tinto moved toward promoting an institutional approach to retention planning.

Kalsbeek's Institutional Approach

 Kaslbeek (2013a; 2013b) institutional approach to retention is the second framework supporting the researchers study. Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b) addressed the third prong: (3) an institutional approach to improving retention. Conceptually, Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b) built upon Tinto (1993 and 2012) because Tinto 1993 and 2012 recognized the significance of classroom experiences. Kalsbeek's 4Ps framework categorized profile, progress, process and promise and thereby incorporated the researchers first two prongs: (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education and (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems.

Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b), like most retention researchers, acknowledged Tinto (1975), but Kalsbeek also includes Tinto (2012), agreeing that previous theories pinning retention almost solely on student affairs personnel is flawed. Faculty should bear some responsibility regarding retention (Tinto, 2012; Kalsbeek, 2013a; 2013b). Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b) supported Tinto's (2012) assertion that retaining students from the first year to the second year should include ensuring students have acquired knowledge necessary to be successful in their second year of college. As aforementioned, Tinto (2012) suggested formative assessments to allow feedback to students. Kalsbeek (2013a) went further to recommended reviewing high-risk courses instead of simply focusing on students to determine whether there are factors within courses preventing certain students from completing the courses with a satisfactory grade.

Kalsbeek (2013) suggested framing student retention as institutional goal through his 4 Ps approach: profile, progress, processes, and promise. Concerning profiling students, Kalsbeek (2013a) asserted that members of retention teams usually examine student data obtained through the admission process and placement assessments in an effort to design intervention focused on groups identified to be at-risk for withdrawing from courses or dropping out of college

altogether. Kaslbeek (2013a; 2013b) agreed that targeted programs for students who have

historically struggled in higher education have the potential to benefit some students in at-risk

categories. However, within the 4Ps framework, Kaslbeek (2013b) maintained that campus

personnel should view student profile data and market profile data together; profile is the first

"p." Market profile refers to the institution's identity in terms of the name recognition and

public perception of the institution; the types of students who typically apply; cost of tuition;

availability of on-campus housing; number of full-time faculty versus part-time faculty; breadth

of program; and flexibility of class schedules and delivery methods (Kaslbeek, 2013b).

Kalsbeek (2013b) posited that often retention strategies fail when planners ignore the

institutional factors correlated with admissions, student progress, retention and graduation. In

fact, Kalsbeek (2013b) argued that "Attempting to frame and focus institutional retention

strategy independent of a market-centered context contributes to misaligned expectations and

marginalizes the essential coordination of efforts required for retention strategies to gain

meaningful traction" (p. 19).

In regard to the second "p", progress, Kalsbeek (2013a) expressed that "persistence

without progress may be the worst possible outcome" and "retention is not about persistence at

all; it is about progress" (2013a, pp. 9-10). Kalsbeek (2013b), emphasized the importance of

students obtaining the knowledge and skills to progress successfully from year-to year. Progress

included course redesign and thoughtful curriculum planning as vital features of an effective

retention plan. Based on this idea, Kalsbeek (2013a, 2013b) pointed out that campus personnel

should investigate courses with high failure rates and high withdrawal rates to determine whether

there were built-in obstacles that became insurmountable for students. Investigating courses

broadens retention planning from being narrowly focused on at-risk students to include closely-

related factors, which are at-risk courses (Kalsbeek, 2013a). Using data revealed by reviews of courses with high failure rates and high withdrawal rates allows campus personnel to brainstorm ideas targeting the courses (Kalsbeek, 2013a). Additionally, the tasks of reviewing curriculum, holding brainstorming sessions, and redesigning courses increases accountability for academic affairs personnel (Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b).

Regarding the third "p", Process, Kalsbeek maintained that campus leaders should focus on improving the efficiency of processes and policies that hinder "all" students such as advising, registration, billing, and financial aid (2013a). According to Kalsbeek, creating "seamless" business processes reduces "snags, obstacles, barriers, and fragmentations" which bother all students, but can be extremely disconcerting to at-risk students who are more likely to withdraw when frustrated (p.11). Focusing on processes was another way in which Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b) broadens retention planning beyond singularly concentrating retention strategies on at-risk students. By improving institutional processes, all students benefit from easier, smoother information flow which improves overall retention (Kalsbeek, 2013a). Furthermore, improving institutional processes for all students may result in retaining the students who were not identified as at-risk but are in fact students who would drop out of college due to frustrations with "high-risk experiences and encounters" (2013a, p. 11) related to "processes, programs, policies, and personnel" (2013b, p. 108) of important aspects of college life such as housing, advising, registration, billing, and financial aid. While some students are able to navigate through college administrative processes and disregard less than optimal treatment from campus personnel, other students are less capable of managing stress or lack prior world experience to critically think and reason their way through campus systems (Conley, 2008; Castro, 2013, Kaslbeek, 2013a). In Kalsbeek's model, Process also included academic affairs accountability.

Some examples were programs for first year students or learning communities with instructional

components aimed to boost academic and social engagement among students outside of the

classroom; increase opportunities for faculty and student engagement outside of the classroom;

and provide special advising and pre-registration opportunities (Kalsbeek, 2013b). Another

advantage of learning communities mentioned by Kalsbeek (2013b) was the opportunity to

integrate content from different courses to demonstrate to students the ways in which the student

learning outcomes attributed to the courses in their degree plan are relevant to their college

success as well as their chosen career (Kalsbeek, 2013b).

Lastly, Kalsbeek (2013a, 2013b) labelled the fourth "p" as Promise and encouraged

institutions to remain true to their promises, meaning the brand, language, and values used to

market the institution to students (2013a, p. 11). Similar to the purchase experience of any

shopper, Kalsbeek stated that student attrition is a function of unmet expectations (Kalsbeek,

2013a). Furthermore, Kalsbeek (2013a) explained that students chose the institution based on

the marketing and recruiting efforts of the institution, and if the institution did not live up to the

promises, students felt misled by the institution. Kalsbeek (2013b) explained that student

dissatisfaction increases risk of attrition and diminishes the institution's "brand promise and

distinctiveness" (p. 54).

Kalsbeek (2013b) asserted that connecting brand promises to retention is a vital

component of retention planning and requires:

> assessment of an organization's brand through the eyes of its customers and through the
>
> eyes of other stakeholders and key audiences, as well as a comparison of current and
>
> potential competitors. By studying the brand from these multiple perspectives, an
>
> organization can clarify what it does well, how it meets the needs of its customers better

than the competition, and if the potential customer is able to evaluate whether they are interested in engaging with the brand based on these brand associations and attributes (p.52).

Kalsbeek (2013b) emphasized the importance of ensuring students have positive experiences in areas "most clearly aligned with the institutional brand" (p. 54). The significant target outcomes are improving student satisfaction with the institution, improving retention, and strengthening the institution's brand and reputation (Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b).

Kalsbeek (2013b) summarized the 4 Ps framework as a way of organizing and outlining retention efforts such that retention is not an additional initiative but instead integrated within the mission, the marketing, courses, programs, processes, and policies of the institution

The researcher's Concept Analysis Chart organized the studies reviewed by the researcher which support the importance of the present study and support the research questions.

Concept Analysis Chart

The following tables highlight studies supporting the literature topics.

Table 2.1 Conceptual Analysis

TOPIC: Studies Related to Supporting the Importance of Present Study

Miller, N. B. and Bell, B. (2016)	To provide an option for a predictive student persistence model and describe the use of the model for improving student persistence.	Researchers studied a liberal arts college with a main campus, 36 nationwide locations and an online campus.	Researchers used three theoretical perspectives as foundations for the design. Those were the Metzner and Bean Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition, 1987; Kember's Model of Dropout from Distance Education Courses, 1989; and Millem and Berger's Model of College Student Persistence, 1997. Researchers used a mixed methods approach; collected data in two stages and implemented triangulation.	The results indicated that predictive models should be institutions specific. There were some positive effects that were difficult to untangle and attribute to one particular factor. Also, faculty and staff had mixed responses, but there were overall positive benefits for nontraditional students.
Walker, R., & Florea, L. (2014)	To explore the role of the investment in human capital to the students' post-graduation incomes as well as moral hazard	Researchers used data from the 2001 Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation. There were 2,676 individuals in the survey.	Researchers used an instrumental variable model. The covariates included age, education, income, and behavior.	Researchers found that students are less likely to engage in moral hazardous behavior it they are older and if their financial assistance had costlier consequences (i.e. had to be repaid or was employer-sponsored).

TOPIC: Studies Related to Cognitive Concerns and College Readiness

Castro, E. L. (2013)	To determine and assess current Illinois college programs and evaluate Conley's college and career readiness model.	Researcher compiled data from Illinois community colleges and high school graduation data and matched data to similar data in Conley's model.	Researcher used the framework as one way to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programming offered by community colleges to high school students	Researchers found that Conley's model was insufficient for understanding college and career readiness respective of race and socioeconomic class.
Cates, J. T., & Schaefle, S. E. (2011).	To evaluate the relationship between elements of a college preparation program and the college readiness of low-income a diverse group of students following six years of participation.	There were a total of 187 participants. who were in the 5th or 6th grade when data collection began.	The six year-program included tutoring, mentoring, advising, college admissions pre-tests, college campus visits, summer programs, and educational field trips.	Researchers found that key elements of the program translated to an increase among Latin and low-income students in the desire to attending college as well as increase in social and college cultural awareness boosting likelihood of adapting to the first-year of college.

| Hodara, M., Jaggars, S. & Karp, M. (2012) | To review assessment and placement policies and practices at open-access two year colleges in Georgia, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin | 183 respondents at open-access two year colleges | Researchers interviewed hundreds of community college stakeholders at 38 institutions in seven different states.

The researchers sought to explore:
1. Lack of student preparation for test and understanding of process
2. Misalignment between test content and academic curriculum and standards in college courses.
3. Use of a single measure for placement of students. | Researchers found that most of the colleges in the study had used a procedure to address one limitation without consideration of other limitations that may be affect the same problem in regard to poor course placement accuracy or inconsistent standards. |

TOPIC: Studies Related to Strategies Addressing Non-Cognitive Concerns Affecting Retention.

Study	Purpose	Participant	Design/Analysis	Outcome

Boyraz, G., Granda, R., Baker, C. N., Tidwell, L. L., & Waits, J. B. (2016	To explore the relationship between PTSD symptoms and continued enrollment in college among trauma-exposed college students as well as test a model for potential interventions.	The participants were 928 first-year students attending a public university located in the southern region of the United States. They were recruited from a first-year orientation course. After removing the students who did not report exposure to a traumatic even, there were 484 participants.	Researchers conducted a Revised Stressful Life Events Screening Questionnaire and researchers tracked the students' academic performance over three semesters.	Researchers found that the students who were exposed to trauma but did not have PTSD symptoms were less likely to drop out of college. First-year students with PTSD demonstrated difficulty maintaining a high GPA. Researcher posit that campus personnel implement interventions to improve academic outcomes.

DeAngelo, L. (2014)	To understand how participation in first-year programs affect students and their intention to return to college for their second year	Researcher used data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Programs (CIRP) 2007 Freshman Survey (TFS) and 2008 Your First College Year (YFCY) survey; Data from IPEDS on fall-to-fall first time full-time retention rates. The total sample was 25,602 students.	Researcher used a blocked binary logistic regression in STATA 11 to predict the intention of students to reenroll for the second year of college at the same institution	Researcher found that the overall probability that a student who completed the first-year program intended to return for the second year The factors with the most significance were the ability of the first-year program: to foster discussions between students outside of class; to foster academic engagement between students outside of class; (especially helpful for male students and students who live off campus); and to foster interaction between campus personnel and students outside of class.

Flores, S. M., & Park, T. J. (2013)	In regard to Latin and African-American Texas high school graduates: the study examines their choice of institution of higher education; the influence of precollege characteristics; and the postsecondary graduation outcomes.	Select cohorts from the administrative data of Texas minority serving institutions from 1997 to 2008.	Researchers employed a logistic regression model; a multinomial logistic regression model; and a logistic regression model with covariates specific to the institution.	Race is a factor for enrollment among Latinos and African Americans. Struggles in regard to degree completion are present across all institutions in consideration of precollege characteristics. Opportunities abound for partnerships between two-year and four-year institutions for seamless transfers and between postsecondary institutions and secondary schools in terms of curriculum preparation.
Hardy S, Francis S, Zamboanga B, Kim S, Anderson S, Forthun L. (2013).	To examine the roles of identity formation and moral identity in predicting college student mental health.	There were 9,500 college students from 31 different universities, who completed an online self-re .	Researchers used parameters with variables for moral identity, identity formation, and six health outcomes.	Researchers found that the structural equation models successfully predicted five of the six health outcomes, linking identity maturity and moral identity to health outcomes. Students would benefit from assistance in identity development and commitment.

Rigali-Oiler, M., & Kurpius, S. R. (2013).	To investigate whether racial/ ethnic identity would also be related to undergraduates' decisions to persist in college and whether a student's gender was related to persistence decisions.	The sample consisted of a total of 1,159 (446 male and 713 female) students, who ranged in age from 18 to 20 years.	Researchers provided a survey packet which included five instruments assessing the study variables to include a 10-item self - esteem scale with a Likert-type scale; academic self-efficacy with 28-item educational degree behavior self-efficacy scale; a 14-item university environment scale; a racial/ethnic identity was assessed based on Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity measures; and a 30-item persistence decision indicator.	Racial and ethnic minority student reported that racial and ethnic identity was central to their identity. Race and ethnic identity was far less important to European American students. The researchers also found that counselors play a significant role in building confidence among students and promoting respect among diverse student populations.

Seelman, K. L. (2014).	To explore the issues of college students identifying themselves other than female and male.	The sample included 30 individuals who identified as transgender or gender non-conforming. The participants were at least age 18 and were faculty, staff, or students of a Colorado college or university.	The research team collected most demographic information through a brief survey distributed before or after the semi-structured interview.	Researcher found five main themes: These themes included: 1. the need for campus programs and support for trans individuals. 2. improvement of campus procedures to classify students beyond female and male and ability to change name. 3. greater inclusivity and recruitment of diverse groups. 4. improvement of facilities. 5. procedures to hold campus personnel accountable.

Wolff, J. R., Himes, H. L., Soares, S. D., & Miller Kwon, E. (2016).	To study the experiences and feelings of students identifying other than female or males at an institution of higher education who attend a nonaffirming religiously affiliated universities (NARAUs) that enforces restrictive admission and policies toward sexual minority (SM) students.	The sample consisted of 213 SM students currently enrolled a religious college, university, or seminary that holds a nonaffirming view of LGBQ topics and/or does not admit openly LGBQ students and/or prohibits expression of LGBQ identity.	Researchers collected online data using a secure portal. Participants were recruited through nonrandom techniques via paid targeted techniques to include social media and newspaper advertisements, e-mailing SM and religious organizations, professional list-serves and colleagues, and contacting SM student groups at religious colleges.	Researchers found that SM students who attend Mormon, Evangelical, and Nondenominational Christian NARAUs had more difficultly coming to terms with their sexual orientation than those in Catholic or Mainline Protestant schools. Students who participated in a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) had significantly less difficultly with their sexual orientation than students who were not involved.

Summary

Students do not persist in higher education for various reasons but there are

commonalities. Researchers found that at-risk students are often academically challenged

students; students with disabilities; low-income students; and minorities (Arnold, Lu, &

Armstrong, 2012; DeAngelo, 2014; Renn & Reason, 2013). These students tended to lack the

navigation skills necessary for applying, registering, and managing the paperwork and deadlines

of college and the students are underprepared for the academic rigor of college once classes

begin (Conley, 2008). Contemporary advising includes the use of predictive analytics to design

interventions for specific groups (Hoover, 2015; Miller & Bell, 2016). A traditional feature of

retention effort is remedial education (Braxton, Doyle, & Hartley, 2014; Brothen & Wambach,

2012; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). However, remedial instruction has come under scrutiny with critics suggesting adjustments or even elimination (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Another standby strategy in regard to academic improvement is the use of tutors (Neel & Grindem, 2011; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011).

Students who grew up in poor families or attended schools with inadequate resources or lived in households or communities where education is not highly-valued often struggle to persist in college due to cognitive and non-cognitive reasons to including financial, time management, and emotional stress (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Renn & Reason, 2013). Differences in religion, gender identity and expression, mental health conditions and physical disability are also non-cognitive factors influencing the commitment of student to the institution (Kalsbeek, 2013a; Lightweis, 2014; O'Keefe, 2013; Renn & Reason, 2013; Swecker, Fifolt & Searby 2013). Retention planning teams have launched a number of strategies to respond to the unprecedented diversity among the student population who also face non-academic challenges (Kalsbeek, 2013a; Lightweis, 2014; O'Keefe, 2013; Renn & Reason, 2013; Swecker, Fifolt & Searby 2013).

Effective integration into the academic and social systems is required to fully adapt to college life (Conley, 2008; Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993; 2012). Researchers found that specific initiatives as well as welcoming behaviors of the faculty and staff boost students' ability to cope and thereby learn (DeAngelo, 2014; Kalsbeek, 2013a; Lightweis, 2014; Swecker, Fifolt & Searby 2013; Tinto, 1993). Students should "feel as though they are cared for by a significant figure within the university" (O'Keefe, 2013, p. 608) Positive relationships between students and campus professionals are vital (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993; 2012) and that the institution lives up to the promises marketed to students during the recruitment process (Kalsbeek (2013a).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The researcher sought to examine the factors affecting persistence and retention of Columbus State University students by studying the reasons incoming CSU freshmen provided for choosing to attend CSU and compare those responses to the reasons that graduating CSU students gave for persisting at CSU. The researcher selected a mixed method research design. Hays and Singh (2012) explained that quantitative and qualitative research can inform each other and regularly each has characteristics of the other during the research process. The researcher's design mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches into a "fully integrated mixed data analysis" Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 280). In the study, the researcher used two phases.

Phase one consisted of a quantitative questionnaire developed from the researcher's literature review. The questionnaire presented multiple choice questions designed to understand the incoming individual characteristics of the students, a set of questions that participants answered using a Likert scale, and one free-response question. The questionnaires were given to incoming freshmen and graduating seniors. The researcher developed open-ended qualitative interview protocols to survey freshmen and graduating seniors during phase two. In phase two, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews or focus groups as dictated by the availability of student participants.

The researcher analyzed the collected quantitative data using SPSS and analyzed the qualitative transcripts using NVIVO. The researcher reported data visually and through narratives. Through the visual presentations and narratives, the researcher organized the findings by describing the population, sample, and frequency of responses. The mixed method two-phase approach provided a better understanding of the factors influencing persistence at CSU. The

findings will be reported in Chapter Four. The researcher will present recommendations based on the findings in Chapter Five.

Research Questions

The researcher examined the reasons that incoming CSU freshmen provided for choosing to attend CSU and compare those responses to the reasons that graduating CSU students gave for persisting at CSU.

1. What are the reasons graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU?

2. What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend CSU?

3. Is there a relationship between the reasons students gave for choosing CSU and the reasons students give for persisting at CSU?

Research Design

Rationale for Mixed Method Approach

The researcher investigated the persistence and retention of CSU students using quantitative and qualitative means and describe findings using both narratives and visual representations of statistics. (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The pragmatism paradigm served as a guide for ethe researcher's design. Pragmatism is commonly associated with mixed method research because it allows for the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research to explain the observations (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Mixed methodologists asserted that quantitative and qualitative methods are "compatible" (p. 15) to the inductive reasoning of qualitative research and the deductive reasoning of quantitative research. Qualitative research purports there is no single reality; rather, realities are constructs of individuals based on their unique perspectives resulting from their experiences, environments, or conditions (Lincoln & Guba 1989.) Thus, the qualitative approach helped the researcher develop a rich understanding of the multiple realities and values among

CSU students affecting persistence and retention. Additionally, quantitative research usually involves selecting a sample of a population that has the probability of being inclusive of the larger population for the purpose of describing the sample and the behavior to predict the expectations of the larger population (Teddlie & Tashakkori). The qualitative responses and quantitative expressions of the qualitative data benefits CSU by informing CSU stakeholders of the relationships among sampled CSU students and provide research-based data from which enrollment managers may choose to respond.

Details of the Research Design

The researcher study to took place between July 2017 and August 2017 and was comprised of two classifications of students. The two classifications of students were incoming freshmen and graduating students. Similar to Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick (2006), the researcher set the first phase to be quantitative and the second phase of the study to be qualitative.

The researcher's phase one consisted of a quantitative survey of multiple-choice questions to obtain demographic information, multiple choice questions addressing the reasons incoming freshmen chose to attend CSU according to a 4-point Likert scale, and one area for a free response to capture a reason not provided on the prewritten questionnaire. The incoming freshmen who received the questionnaire were newly-admitted freshmen participating in the CSU ROAR (Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration) program during the summer of 2017. The design was similar to Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick (2006) in that phase one is quantitative and featured a Likert scale. The researcher enlisted the assistance of the ROAR advisor to offer the questionnaire to the students participating in ROAR.

In the qualitative, phase two, the researcher asked open-ended questions to follow-up focus groups of the freshmen student population. The researcher's open-ended questions

addressed the areas identified in the literature review. During the focus groups, the researcher

recorded the responses. The transcribed responses were analyzed using NVIVO.

The researcher created tables to show results from phase one. Tables present the

commonalities, disparities and outlier responses from the sampled population of CSU students.

In addition, the researcher compiled numerical outcomes from the data and presented the results

in narrative form. The analysis will be presented in Chapter Four.

The researcher also conducted one-on-one interviews with seniors who expected to

graduate in 2017. The researcher's open-ended questions were based on areas identified in the

literature review. The questions asked were similar to those asked of the freshmen. The

researcher also asked two additional questions to address the fact that graduating seniors have

been enrolled for multiple semesters, and have many more experiences over which to comment.

The researcher contacted faculty members teaching students identified as graduating seniors for

assistance with recruiting students for the study. The researcher recorded the focus group

sessions and analyzed the responses using NVIVO.

Connection to Similar Designs

The researcher's design had similarities to Ivankova, Creswell & Stick (2006).

Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick studied persistence among a sample of university students. The

researcher's design was similar to Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick (2006) in that the researcher

used the literature review to create Likert-scaled questionnaires for the quantitative phase one.

However, the quantitative questionnaire differed from Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick, in that the

researcher offered students an opportunity to write in their reason for choosing CSU if the

participants' reason was not provided in the initial quantitative questionnaire.

The researcher chose the Likert scale to assist in efficiently analyzing data. Over 80 years

of persistence and retention studies conducted by hundreds of researchers, some student

responses were expected because they had repeatedly been provided by students over 80 years.

In an effort to capture information specific to CSU students the researcher included one free

response in the quantitative questionnaire. Additionally, phase two was entirely composed of

open-ended questions. The students were able to respond freely. The researcher recorded their

answers the responses will be presented in Chapter Four.

Population

The "accessible population" as defined by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) was the

number of students from which the researcher could reasonably collect data. For the study, the

researcher selected two classifications of students: students who were about to begin their first

semester as CSU, and students who were about to graduate from CSU. Based on the literature

review, the researcher determined these two subgroups of the total CSU student population were

the best groups from which the researcher would capture reasons for choosing CSU and compare

those reasons to the reasons students reported as ultimately causing them to persist at CSU to

degree completion. Due to the mixed method approach, the researcher used sampling procedures

that are common to quantitative and qualitative strategies. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009)

asserted that mixed methods research "often combines both purposive and probability sampling

to meet the requirements specified by the research questions" (p. 169). The quantitative strategy,

cluster sampling, is a type of probability sampling though which researchers identify a group or

cluster "naturally in the population" (p. 171). Cluster sampling also means selecting a group of

categories that may best answer questions for the study when there are time or economic

restraints (Balnaves & Caputi, 2008; Levy & Lemeshow, 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

For the study, the population is CSU students, and the natural clusters of CSU students are class

categories such as freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The researcher focused the study

on freshmen and seniors. A common qualitative approach is the purposive sampling technique which is used to glean rich information from a specific group selected based on the group's ability to answer the research questions with detail (Teddlie &Tashakkori, 2009). Purposive sampling which is also called judgmental sampling allows the researcher to select participants who were considered to best represent the entire population (Levy & Lemeshow, 2013).

The researcher's strategy had components of cluster sampling and purposive sampling and is a modified snowball sampling (Trochim, 2006). With snowball sampling, the researcher asks an individual familiar with the group the researcher wants to sample or is a member of the group to recommend others who represent the group (Trochim, 2006). In the study, the CSU ROAR advisor who had contact information for incoming freshmen as well as a CSU faculty member teaching graduating seniors assisted the researcher with recruiting participants for the study. Additionally, CSU students who received invitations to participate in the focus groups served as recruiters by recruiting friends to participate in the study.

Participants

The researcher gained the permission of the ROAR advisor to offer a voluntary survey to students participating in July 2017 orientations and to contact newly-admitted students for a voluntary focus group. The researcher also gained permission from a faculty member teaching graduating seniors for permission to contact students for a voluntary focus group. The researcher employed ethical principles and confidentiality throughout the voluntary process. Students were aware that they have the right to withdraw at any time.

Sample

Incoming freshmen and graduating seniors were the "units of analysis" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 169) or the subgroups driving the research. For the study, the researcher

gained permission from the ROAR advisor to offer an anonymous survey to students participating in two-day CSU ROAR (Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration) sessions for traditional students who have recently graduated from high school. The researcher, with the permission of a faculty member teaching graduating seniors, contacted graduating seniors to request their participation in a focus group.

Instrumentation

Phase one was quantitative. The researcher used a questionnaire with newly-admitted freshmen consisting of 20-questions. The first seven questions for the freshmen provided information on the age, race, high school grade point average, high school extracurricular activities, financial status of students, whether the student is a first-generation college student, and whether the student characterizes himself or herself of as resilient enough to successfully handle challenges in college. The next 10 questions were designed with a 4-point Likert scale and will ask students whether certain reasons played a role in why they chose to attend CSU. The reasons offered in the 10 questions were closely associated with factors in the literature review that have influenced persistence among students in other higher education studies. Specifically, the researcher was interested in addressing (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems (3) the institutional approach to improving retention. Questions 18 and 19 addressed the initial commitment of students to graduation as well initial commitment to CSU. Tinto asserted that students' incoming commitment level to graduating and incoming commitment level to the university influenced whether they withdrew from the university (Tinto, 1975). The 20th question was a free response questions, allowing students to type or write in a reason other than one on the questionnaire that he or she chose to attend CSU.

Phase two was qualitative. The qualitative interview protocol consisted of five similar questions for focus groups or one-on-on interview with newly-admitted freshmen and graduating seniors. The five questions were related to (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems (3) the institutional approach to improving retention and (4) the CSU Mission Statement. The researcher asked the graduating seniors two additional questions addressing stress level at and whether they seriously considered withdrawing at one point in their matriculation.

Data Collection

The researcher collected quantitative data in phase one using a questionnaire developed from the researcher's literature review. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice questions designed to understand individual characteristics of the students, reasons for choosing to attend CSU, reasons for persisting at CSU and interactions at CSU. Seven questions were multiple-choice. The participants answered using the next 12 questions using a Likert-scale, and one question was a free-response question. In phase two, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews or focus groups as dictated by the availability of student participants. The responses were recorded for transcription.

Data Analysis

The researcher used SPSS to analyze the quantitative questionnaire and presented the data visually to display the responses of the participants. In addition, the researcher compiled numerical outcomes from the data and presented the data in narrative form. The researcher used NVIVO to analyze the transcripts of focus groups and one-on-one interviews and presented the data in narratives. The analysis will be presented in Chapter Four.

Limitations

The participants in this research study were limited to incoming freshmen and graduating seniors. Sophomore and junior CSU students were not included; therefore, their perspectives were not be captured. Time consideration was another limitation. The researcher conducted the study July and August 2017. The participants in this research study were an "accessible population" as defined Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009). This included incoming freshmen and graduating seniors who were available during the summer semester and the break before fall semester. The researcher used modified snowball sampling and asking members of CSU faculty and staff to assist with recruiting participants for the study. (Trochim, 2006). CSU students served as recruiters for classmates or friends. Due to these limitations, the study was not conducted with random sampling.

Delimitations

Cluster sampling benefits researchers who have time constraints, and purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose specific settings or groups with a likelihood of providing "depth" for the study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 174). During the summer, the CSU student population is lower than fall and summer semester. However, with the permission and assistance to CSU faculty and staff, the researcher overcame the obstacle by sampling students in the summer program called ROAR (Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration) and

recruiting graduating seniors who enrolled in summer courses. These strategies were an efficient use of the summer when fewer students are taking classes, and very few freshmen are on campus.

The following table presents the research corresponding to the quantitative questionnaire, qualitative interview protocol, and research questions which guided the researcher's study.

Table 3.1 Item Analysis for Quantitative Questionnaire

Phase One: Quantitative Item Analysis

Item	Research	Research Question
1. Age	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Renn & Reason, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
2. Race	Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Renn & Reason, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012; Rigali-Oiler and Kurpis, 2013; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998	1, 2, 3
3. Pre-College Academic Preparation	Brothen &Wambach, 2012; Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Conley, 2008; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Neel & Grindem, 2011;Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
4. Pre-College Social Integration	Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3

5. Socioeconomic Level	Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Renn & Reason, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
6. First-Generation College Student	Goldrick-Rab and Cook, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Lightweis, 2014; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
7. Sense of Identity	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
8. Location of Family while attending college	Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
9. Accessibility to Faculty	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
10. On-campus housing	Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Kalsbeek,(2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
11. Social life	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
12. Religious tolerance	Affolter, 2013; Bowman & Smedley, 2013; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Patel & Giess, 2015; Shammas, 2015; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016	1, 2, 3
13. LGBTQ tolerance	Renn & Reason, 2013; Seelman, 2014; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016	1, 2, 3

14. Availability of academic resources	Brothen &Wambach, 2012; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Neel & Grindem, 2011; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
15. Availability of student support services	Boyraz, Granda, Baker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016; Hardy, Francis, Zamboanga, Kim, Anderson, Forthun, 2013; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Renn and Reason, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
16. Friendliness of campus personnel	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
17 Focus on First-Year Students	Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroeder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005; Roach, 1998; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
18. Institutional commitment	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
19. Graduation commitment	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
20. Overall reason (open-question)	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3

Table 3.2 Item Analysis for Qualitative Interview Protocol

Phase Two: Qualitative Item Analysis

Item	Research	Research Question
1. Commitment of CSU to student support programs addressing diverse identities of students	Boyraz, Granda, Baker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016; Hardy, Francis, Zamboanga, Kim, Anderson, Forthun, 2013; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Renn and Reason, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
2. Location of Family while attending college	Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Kalsbeek	1, 2, 3
3. CSU's commitment to good customer service	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
4. CSU's commitment to mission statement	Brothen &Wambach, 2012; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Neel & Grindem, 2011; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
5. Overall reason for choosing CSU (freshmen) Overall reason for persisting (seniors)	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 2, 3
6. Stress associated with CSU (seniors only)	Goldrick-Rab and Cook, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Lightweis, 2014; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 3
7. Considered withdrawing from CSU (seniors only)	Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012	1, 3

The following table connects the research question with the data sources and rationale.

Table 3.3. Research Confirmation Table

Research Question	Instrumentation/Analysis	How will strategy answer research question?
1. What are the reasons graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU?	The researcher's interview protocol with the graduating seniors probes the factors influencing their decision to persist at CSU to degree completion. Questions address will pose topics including: • Acceptance/Tolerance of diversity • Student (personal) support resources • Academic support resources • Engagement with faculty • Processes/Customer service (friendliness)	Tinto's (1996) identified at least seven factors related to retention: academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, uncertain, narrow or new goals, external commitment, financial concerns, lack of student-institution fit, and isolation from campus life (DeAngelo, 2014). Other factors affecting persistence included size of the institution, type of student housing, student activities, and student financial resources. (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). Tutoring, out-of-class supplemental academic support, and accessibility to faculty made a difference for students (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Ellertson &Thoennes, 2007; Rutschow and Schneider, 2011; Shaw and Mattern, 2013). Counseling for personal challenges, resources, and tolerance of diversity to includedgender expression, religious identification, mental health and physical disability concerns improved student success (Affolter, 2013; Patel & Giess, 2015; Renn & Reason, 2013; Seelman, 2014)., Wolff, Himes, Soares & Miller Kwon, 2016).

| 2. What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend CSU? | The researcher's quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interview protocol reasons why incoming freshmen chose CSU and what incoming freshmen found to be beneficial during the admissions and orientation process.
The researcher's survey questions and focus-group questions why students chose CSU?
Questions address will pose topic including:
• Distance from parents
• Financial aid/cost of college
• Size of classes
• Academic support resources
• Student (personal) support resources
• Acceptance/Tolerance of diversity
• Processes/Customer service (friendliness)
• Engagement with faculty | College preparation programs affected college readiness (Conley, 2008). Race, socioeconomic class, and culture differences impacted college readiness (Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). Researchers found factors affecting student persistence include academic potential, grade performance, intellectual development, friendships, and academic and social interactions between students outside of class as well as interactions with campus personnel (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2011; DeAngelo, 2014; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Lightweis, 2014; Spady 1971; Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012) |
| 3. Is there a relationship between the reasons students give for attending CSU and the reasons students give for persisting at CSU?? | The researcher's survey questions and focus-group questions will probe whether experiences, campus resources, or processes at CSU served as hindrances which students overcame in order to persist at CSU to degree completion. | Integrating responsibilities of academic affairs personnel and student affair personnel resulted in a focused effort toward goals, streamlined services for students, and increased accountability from campus personnel toward persistence and retention goals (Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b; Goldrick-Rab & Cook 2011; Ozaki & Hornak, 2014). Students chose the institution based on the marketing and recruiting efforts and expected faculty, staff, and services to operate at the standards described (Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b.) |

Summary

The researcher sought to better understand the factors affecting persistence and retention

of Columbus State University students by studying the reasons incoming CSU freshmen

provided for choosing to attend CSU and compare those responses to the reasons that graduating

CSU students gave for persisting at CSU. Specifically, the researcher was interested in

addressing (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education,

(2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems (3) the institutional

approach to improving retention. The researcher selected a mixed method research design and

the participants will be incoming freshmen and graduating seniors. In the study, the researcher

used two phases. Phase one was a quantitative questionnaire developed from the researcher's

literature review. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice questions designed to

understand the incoming individual characteristics of the students, a set of questions that

participants will answer using a Likert scale, and one free-response question. The researcher

developed open-ended qualitative interview protocols to survey freshmen and graduating seniors

during phase two. In phase two, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews or focus

groups. The researcher analyzed the collected quantitative data using SPSS and analyzed the

qualitative transcripts using NVIVO. The researcher reported data visually with tables and

narratives. The researcher proposed the mixed method two-phase approach based on the

literature review and likelihood of benefiting faculty, staff, and leaders interested in a better

understanding of the factors influencing persistence at CSU.

CHAPTER FOUR

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results derived by the researcher from a mixed method study. The researcher investigated the reasons CSU incoming freshmen provided for choosing to attend CSU and compared those responses to the reasons that graduating CSU students gave for persisting at Columbus State University using a questionnaire, focus group, and interviews.

The quantitative questionnaire and qualitative focus group and interview protocols were developed from the synthesis of factors represented in the researcher's review of literature. The researchers' conceptual framework took into account Tinto's (1975; 1987; 1993; 2012) theories and Kalsbeek's (2013a; 2013b) institutional approach to retention. The conceptual framework for the study emerged from three key ideas from Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993; 2012) and Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b) (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems and (3) the institutional approach to improving retention.

The results showed perceptions of incoming CSU freshmen and the experiences of graduating CSU seniors. Some of responses linked to the key ideas of the researcher's conceptual framework. In the chapter, the researcher describes findings using both narratives and visual representations.

Research Questions

The six-year graduation rate at CSU has remained at 30% since 2005 (CSU Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2017). The researcher sought to study persistence, which may thereby provide some indications to why the graduation has remained unchanged. Three questions steered the study:

1. What are the reasons graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU?

2. What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend CSU?

3. Is there a relationship between the reasons students give for choosing CSU and the reasons students give for persisting at CSU?

Research Design

The researcher selected two categories of students for the study. The two categories of students were incoming freshmen and graduating students. A mixed method approach and two-phase design was selected to explore whether the reasons provided by incoming freshmen for choosing CSU correspond to the reasons graduating students gave for remaining at CSU.

The researcher's timeline coincided with several orientation programs for newly-admitted freshmen during the summer of 2017. The ROAR (Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration) program held during the summer involved students meeting representatives from various areas of CSU, touring the university to learn about campus resources, hearing from current students, registering for classes, and spending a night on campus to experience residential housing. The researcher gained permission from the Student Development Specialist who coordinated ROAR to offer the questionnaire to the students participating in ROAR.

To reach graduating seniors, the researcher sent emails to graduating seniors, as well as faculty who taught graduating seniors in an effort to recruit participants for the study. Additionally, CSU students who received invitations to participate in the focus groups served as recruiters.

Phase one of the researcher's mixed method approach to gathering data was quantitative. The 19 questions were closely associated with factors the researcher found while reviewing previous studies. The first seven multiple-choice questions of the researcher's questionnaire covered demographic information and other unique characteristics. The respondents provided information on the age, race, high school grade point average, high school extracurricular activities, financial status of students, whether the student was a first-generation college student, and whether the student characterized himself or herself of as resilient enough to successfully handle challenges in college. For the next 10 questions students answered to what extent certain factors played a role in why they chose to attend CSU. Each item on the survey was evaluated using a Likert-scale using A-D choices (a. very much, b. much, c. somewhat, D. It did not play a role). Questions 18 and 19 addressed the initial commitment of students to graduation as well initial commitment to CSU. In his interactionalist theory, Tinto asserted that students' incoming commitment level to graduating and incoming commitment level to the university influenced whether they withdrew from the university (Tinto, 1975). The final question, question 20, was a free response question which allowed students to write down a factor influencing their reason for choosing CSU which was not provided on the prewritten questionnaire. The incoming freshmen who received the questionnaire were newly-admitted freshmen participating in ROAR.

Phase two was qualitative. The phase consisted of a focus group with freshmen students and individual interviews with graduating seniors. The incoming freshmen who agreed to participate in the focus group were students who had participated in the ROAR program during the summer of 2017. The graduating seniors who participated were students who had been invited to participate in a focus group or interview from emails or had heard about the researcher's study from students who were assisting with ROAR activities.

The qualitative interview protocol consisted of five questions for the newly-admitted freshmen. The five questions were related to (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems (3) institutional approaches and (4) the CSU Mission Statement. The researcher asked similar questions of the graduating seniors, as well as two additional questions addressing stress level and whether they seriously considered withdrawing at one point in their matriculation. The interview protocol used with the incoming freshmen and graduating seniors were based on factors the researcher found while reviewing previous studies.

Respondents

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) defined the "accessible population" (p. 170) as the number of students from which the researcher can reasonably collect data. Mixed methods research "often combines both purposive and probability sampling to meet the requirements specified by the research questions" (2009, p. 169). Therefore, the researcher selected two categories of students: students who are about to begin their first semester as CSU, and students who are about to graduate from CSU. These two subgroups of the total CSU student population were thought to be the best groups for a cluster sampling in a short time period (Balnaves & Caputi, 2008; Levy & Lemeshow, 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The researcher defined the subgroups as the appropriate and accessible population for the study.

The researcher's strategy exercised features of cluster sampling and purposive sampling through modified snowball sampling (Trochim, 2006). According to Trochim (2006), with snowball sampling, a researcher asks an individual familiar with the group the researcher wants to sample or is a member of the group to recommend others who represent the group. In the study, the CSU ROAR coordinator who had contact information for incoming freshmen greatly

assisted the researcher by providing several prime opportunities for the researcher to be visible to the ROAR participants. Additionally, a faculty member, sent an email to graduating seniors she had taught and an email to a faculty member who had also taught students who would be graduating. Thirdly, older students serving as tour guides and helpers during ROAR used their influence to invite graduating seniors to participate in the study.

During the ROAR activities scheduled July 24 and 25, 2017, the researcher was allowed to set up a table in the corridor of Student Recreation Center prior to the formal "Welcome" event for the incoming students. Nearly all of the students passed by the researcher's table after receiving their student identification cards. The researcher conducted phase one of the mixed method data collection by asking students if they would read the Informed Consent Form and complete an anonymous questionnaire. The researcher was also allowed to have a table during lunch at which time the researcher approached students who the researcher had missed earlier in the day. After students completed the questionnaire, the Informed Consent Forms and questionnaires were separated and stored separately. The researcher received 80 completed questionnaires from incoming freshmen. The researchers used SPSS to analyze the results of the questionnaire. The 80 students who completed the questionnaire represented 88% of the students who attended ROAR July 24, 2017.

The researcher conducted phase two of the study with incoming freshmen July 24-25, 2017. The researcher obtained Informed Consent Forms and total of 10 incoming freshmen students participated in two focus groups. The Informed Consent Forms were separated from notes written by the researcher and the participants' responses were digitally recorded. The researcher used NVIVO to analyze the transcribed responses. In addition to the incoming freshmen, phase two also consisted of individual interviews with graduating seniors. These were

conducted July 25, July 31, August 1, and August 14, 2017. The researcher benefited from the snowball sampling. Graduating seniors who knew the ROAR Coordinator and an additional faculty member were willing to spread the word and encouraged eight peers to participate in the study. Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) asserted that qualitative sampling involves "small samples of people, nestled in their context and studied in-depth" (p.30). Sample sizes as low as five among homogenous groups can generate valuable information and saturation, which means interviewees are no longer sharing new ideas can occur at six interviews and nine interviews (Dworkin 2012; Hennick, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2016). The researcher's qualitative sample consisted of 10 incoming freshmen and eight graduating seniors.

The demographic makeup of the incoming freshmen who responded to the quantitative questionnaire during ROAR is shown in Table 4.1. The age of the 80 students who completed the questionnaire was largely homogenous. The majority of the students, 93 percent (75 of 80 respondents) were 18-year-olds. Of the other students, 4 percent (3 of 80 respondents) were 19-year-olds and 3 percent (2 of 80 respondents) were 20 years old. The racial makeup of the respondents was 41 percent (33 of 80 respondents) identified as Caucasian, 40 percent (32 of respondents) were African-American students, eight percent (6 of 80 respondents) stated they were Biracial, 5 percent (four of 80 respondents) identified as Asian, five percent (four of 80 respondents) identified as Hispanic, and one percent (one of 80 respondents) identified as "Other." In regards to incoming grade point averages, 52 percent (42 of the 80 respondents) reported 3.5 to 4.0 grade point averages in high school, 34 percent (27 of 80 respondents) reported 3.0 to 3.4 grade point averages in high school and 14 percent (11 of 80 respondents) stated reported 2.0 to 2.9 grade point averages in high school. When asked about social integration in high school, 93 percent (74 of 80 respondents) percent of the students had

participated in sports or a student organization. It was a multiple answer question and 49 percent (39 of 80 respondents) of the incoming freshmen indicated that they had participated in sports, as well as a student organization with 36 percent (29 of 80 respondents) indicated they held a leadership position in sports or organization. Only eight percent (6 of 80 respondents) stated they did not participate on athletic team or an organization at all in high school. Financial constraints affected 91 percent (73 of 80 respondents): 41 percent (33 of 80 respondents) reported they are relying on financial aid to attend CSU, six percent (5 of 80 respondents) stated they must work to attend CSU, and 44 percent (35 of 80 respondents) stated they need to work in addition to using financial aid. Only nine percent (seven of 80 respondents) reported they could attend CSU without financial aid and without working.

Regarding whether they are the first in their family to attend college, 81 percent (65 of 80 respondents) reported that they are not first-generation college students. The remaining 19 percent (15 of 80 respondents) reported that they were. Of the students who are first generation 53 percent (8 of 15 respondents) were African-American, 26 percent (4 of 15 respondents) were Caucasians, 13 percent (2 of 15 respondents) were Biracial, and seven percent (1 of 15 respondents) were Hispanic. The incoming freshmen who completed the questionnaire reported themselves to be resilient. One hundred percent (80 of 80 respondents) indicated they felt they were resilient enough to remain in college. Of those, 59 percent (47 of 80 respondents) indicated that their pre-college experiences had prepared them for college without support, 25 percent (20 of 80 respondents) indicated they could recover from challenges in colleges if they talked to someone on campus, 16 percent (13 of 80 respondents) said they could recover from challenges in college if they talked to someone back home.

The demographic profile of the students participating in phase two is less defined because the researcher intentionally did not ask specific questions which would make the 18 students easily identifiable to anyone who recruited students for the study upon reading the completed dissertation. The researcher conducted two focus groups with incoming freshmen. There were six students in one session and four in another groups. Additionally, the researcher conducted eight individual interviews with eight graduating seniors. The 18 students who participated in this phase were made up of males and females. Upon observation and confirmed through responses, both group included whites and non-whites. In some answers, the students indicated race, financial need, participation in athletics or student organizations in high school, socioeconomic status and the need for financial aid and jobs to remain in college. Students also indicated health issues and disabilities.

Results

From reviewing the literature, the researcher understood that previous researchers learned that cognitive and non-cognitive factors affect persistence in higher education (Goldrick-Rab & Cook 2011; O'Keeffe, 2013; Renn & Reason, 2013; Turner, 2016). Additionally, the researcher learned from the review of literature that academic affairs and student affairs professionals have implemented various strategies to positively affect the cognitive and non-cognitive challenges facing modern students. The researcher used knowledge gained from the factors to design a mixed methods study.

The researcher presents the data in the chronological order in which the researcher conducted phase one and phase two of the mixed method approach. The order does not address the research questions in the order that the research questions are written. Later, in the chapter the researcher will explain the results of the study in connection to each research question.

The quantitative questionnaire used for phase one is Appendix A. Questions 1-7 addressed the characteristics of students upon enrollment. The literature review revealed that the types of students who were likely to drop out of college included ethnic minorities; students who were academically disadvantaged; students with disabilities; students from lower socioeconomic classes; and probationary students (Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013; Watson, 2013). The researcher sought to record demographic information and compare the study to previous studies which also included Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012).

On the next page, Table 4.1 presents the demographic data from questions 1-7.

Table 4.1

Characteristics of Incoming Freshmen Respondents

Q1: Age	Age 18	Age 19	Age 20	Over 20		
	75	3	2	0		
Q2: Race	African-American	Caucasian	Hispanic	Asian	Biracial	Other
	32	33	4	4	6	1
Q3: GPA	3.5 to 4.0	3.0 to 3.4	2.0 to 2.9			
	42	27	10			
Q4: Activities in High School	Athletics	Student Organization	Leader	Combos of (A, B, C)	Did Not Participate	
	8	22	5	39	6	
Q5: Need to Work or Financial Aid	Financial Aid	Work	Both	Neither		
	32	5	35	7		
Q6: First Generation College Student	Yes	No				
	15	64				
Q7: Ability to Bounce Back from Challenges	Prepared for College by Pre-College Experiences	Need to Talk on Campus	Talk to Someone Off campus	Would Consider Transferring		
	47	20	13	0		

In the literature review, previous studies investigating the preparedness of incoming

indicated a need to recognize that students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, the ability to manage stress

and coping techniques. (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013). Institutions

have shored up academic and student support resources to prepare for challenges students make experience related to race, religion, gender and whether they can adjust to the campus in a new environment away from home (Goldrick-Rab & Cook 2011; Renn and Reason, 2013). The researcher was interested in the level of confidence incoming freshmen would report, and whether any incoming freshmen would report that they anticipated needing academic or student support resources while attending CSU.

Questions 8-17 on the questionnaire were designed to uncover the extent that certain factors influenced their decision to choose CSU. The influential factors listed in the questions were based on the researcher's review of literature. The results of the students' responses show that the short distance between the university and their hometown was the number one reason for 84 percent of the respondents chose CSU. For eight of the factors, at least 50 percent of the respondents reported that the factors influenced them "very much," "much" or "somewhat." Tolerance of their religious choices influenced 41 percent of the students who responded to the questionnaire, and tolerance of LGBT expression influenced 36 percent of respondents.

On the next page, Table 4.2 presents the data from questions 8-17.

Table 4.2

Extent to which Respondents Report Certain Factors Played a Role in Choosing to Attend CSU

Q8: Closeness to Home	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	23	36	8	13
Q9: Student-Faculty Ratio	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	13	22	17	28
Q10: Campus Housing	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	14	17	13	36
Q11: Student Organizations	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	11	20	21	28
Q12: Tolerance of Religion	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	8	16	9	47
Q13: Tolerance of LGBT	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	8	8	13	51
Q14: Academic Resources	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	19	17	24	20
Q15: Student Support Services	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	21	16	18	25
Q16: Customer Service	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	20	17	26	17
Q17: Focus on First Year Students	very much	much	somewhat	did not play a role
	15	19	24	22

Questions 18 and 19 addressed the initial commitment to the university and initial commitment to the university corresponding to Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure Tinto Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012). There were 10 incoming freshmen who reported weak commitment. They are likely to be at-risk for withdrawing from CSU.

Table 4.3

Initial Commitments of Incoming Freshmen Respondents

Q18: Commitment to Graduating	very strong	strong	somewhat strong	weak
	46	14	12	4
Q19: Commitment to CSU	very strong	strong	somewhat strong	weak
	25	25	10	6

Question 20 was a free response question which allowed students to write in their overall reason for choosing CSU in case their reason was not mentioned in the multiple-choice questions. Again, closeness to home was the most frequent response. The frequency chart below shows frequency of other answers. Because the answers were written and not chosen from multiple choice options as questions 1-19, the researcher presented the findings along with the responses from the qualitative freshmen focus groups. The researcher numbered the 80 quantitative questionnaires received by the students. The responses of the students to Question 20 are in Table 4.4 on the following page.

Table 4.4

Overall Reason for Choosing CSU

Response to Question 20	Frequency of Answer
CSU was close to home	28
CSU offered my major	10
CSU felt right	11
CSU met my needs after comparison	7
CSU has reputation for quality education	7
CSU offered me a scholarship	5
Nothing specific about CSU	5
My parents forced me to attend CSU	4
CSU tuition	3
CSU provides various opportunities	2
CSU facilities	1
Some students wrote more than one answer.	

For phase two, the researcher designed the interview protocol to examine how incoming freshmen viewed themselves and what motivated them to choose CSU. The researcher sought to uncover students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, the ability to manage stress and coping techniques. (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013). Other questions were written to uncover what the incoming freshmen perceived about the CSU campus and CSU personnel so far in regard to academic and student support resources Goldrick-Rab & Cook 2011; Renn and Reason, 2013).

The researcher's interview protocol for freshmen is detailed in Table 4.5 and the interview protocol for seniors is detailed in Table 4.6. on the following pages.

Table 4.5

Freshmen Interview Protocol

Freshman Focus Group/Interview Questions	
QUESTION 1	Based on your orientation at ROAR, do you feel CSU demonstrates a commitment to the "identity" of the student body in terms of programs, counselors, or organizations in respect to race, gender, culture, disability services, religious diversity, LGBTQ expression or international student services?
QUESTION 2	Adapting to college and adjusting to new environment away from family is difficult for some students. How much of a role did closeness to your hometown play in your decision to attend CSU based on your initial feeling of being able to cope with academic and social challenges?
QUESTION 3	Based on your orientation at ROAR, registration, admissions process, do you feel CSU demonstrates a commitment to providing "good customer service to you" as far as respecting your time, academic goals, and emotional feelings in terms of accessibility of faculty and staff; timely feedback to questions; helpfulness and friendliness?
QUESTION 4	CSU'S mission statement is: "We empower people to contribute to the advancement of our local and global communities through and emphasis on excellence in teaching and research, life-long learning, cultural enrichment, public-private partnerships, and service to others." Based on the recruitment activities, marketing, orientation at ROAR, registration, admissions process, how has CSU demonstrated a commitment to the mission statement as it related to you, such that it makes you excited about earing your degree from CSU?
QUESTION 5	What was your overall reason for choosing CSU?

Table 4.6

Senior Interview Protocol

Senior Focus Group/Interview Questions	
QUESTION 1	To what extent did CSU demonstrate a commitment to your identity in terms of programs, counselors, or organizations in respect to race, gender, culture, disability services, religious diversity, LGBTQ expression or international student services?
QUESTION 2	How often did you have to find support from a peer or from family because you felt a lack of commitment from CSU?
QUESTION 3	To what extent did CSU demonstrate a commitment providing "good customer service" to you as far as respecting your time, academic goals, and feelings in terms of accessibility of faculty and staff; timely feedback to questions; helpfulness and friendliness?
QUESTION 4	CSU's mission statement is: "We empower people to contribute to the advancement of our local and global communities through and emphasis on excellence in teaching and research, life-long learning, cultural enrichment, public-private partnerships, and service to others." To what extent did CSU demonstrate a commitment (promise) to the mission statement as it related to you, such that it made you want to persist and earn your degree from CSU?
QUESTION 5	What was your overall reason for persisting at CSU?
QUESTION 6	How much stress would you say you experienced directly attributed to CSU?
QUESTION 7	How much thought did you give withdrawing for CSU without completing your degree because of something that happened at CSU?

Data Analysis

In this section, the researcher organizes the data analysis in the following order: discussion of the demographic data and the interpretation of the results as the results correspond to the research questions guiding the study. In the discussion of the results, the researcher aligns the student responses to the research questions.

To glean demographic information, the researcher used a quantitative questionnaire, Appendix A. The researcher designed the first seven questions to gather the age, race, high school grade point average, high school extracurricular activities, financial status of students,

whether the student is a first-generation college student, and whether the student characterizes himself or herself of as resilient enough to successfully handle challenges in college. The next 10 questions were designed with a four-point Likert scale and addressed whether certain reasons played a role in why the incoming freshmen chose to attend CSU. The reasons offered in the 10 questions were based on common reasons the researcher synthesized from the literature review. Questions 18 and 19 were based on Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory. The researcher sought to find out the initial commitment level to graduation and initial commitment level to CSU. The 20th question was a free response and allowed the incoming freshmen to write down their overall reason for choosing CSU. Specifically, the researcher was interested in addressing (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems and (3) the institutional approach to improving retention.

Phase two was qualitative for both incoming freshmen and graduating seniors. The researcher also designed the qualitative interview protocol related to (1) characteristics of students, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems and (3) the institutional approach to improving retention. The researcher also added two questions for the graduating seniors to address stress level at and whether they seriously considered withdrawing at one point in their matriculation.

Demographic Data

The researcher's use of modified snowball sampling (Trochim, 2006) involved asking members of CSU faculty and staff for assistance in recruiting participants for the study. CSU students who agree to participate in the focus groups or interview also served as recruiters for classmates or friends. The snowball sampling strategy resulted in a major benefit. The 80 newly-

admitted freshmen students who responded to the quantitative questionnaire (10 of which agreed

to answer qualitative questions) and the eight graduating seniors who agreed to individual

interview with the researcher represented a diverse cross-section of the modern college student

population.

The researcher's sample was diverse in regard to race, age, gender, sexual orientation,

pre-college academic and social experiences, financial need as well as health challenges and

disability. The 88 students identified as African-Americans, Asians, Caucasians, Hispanics,

Biracial students, and "Other." In addition, there were students who indicated they had

disability, health issues and financial need. Students also indicated that tolerance of religious

views, LGBT expression, and access to campus resources to support them academically and

socially were reasons they chose CSU. In depth detail revealed the students differed in terms of

majors, student leadership experience, and coping skills.

Interpretation of Results in Relation to Research Questions

The researcher's quantitative questionnaires and qualitative protocol were developed

from the researcher's literature review and conceptual framework.   The conceptual framework

for the study emerges from three key ideas from Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012) and

Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b): (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of

higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems and

(3) the institutional approach to improving retention.

The researcher intended to reduce the gap in a 2005 CSU report on retention, progression,

and graduation (RPG) rates. The researcher described the report in Chapter One and Chapter

Five. In the report, the task force stated that they analyzed retention and graduation from the

CSU student population over several categories to include students' gender, ethnic origin,

incoming GPA and admission scores, distance from permanent residence, residence while enrolled at CSU, declared major, financial aid status, and first-year GPA. Additionally, specific focus groups were held for non-traditional students and students employed more than 19 hours. In the report, it was noted that there was better understanding about some classifications of students, for example, students who work and students who have low incoming GPAs, or take courses from part-time instructors. However, the task force members indicated inconclusive information in several areas. The 2005 report was largely based on quantitative data -- the number of students retained. In addition, only non-traditional and working students participated in the qualitative focus groups. The researcher sought to add to the body of knowledge regarding student persistence among CSU students for the benefit of CSU leadership, faculty and staff.

Persistence

The interview protocol developed for the seniors presented previously in Table 4.6 answered Research Question 1. The researcher interviewed eight graduating seniors.

Research Question 1. What are the reasons graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU?

The reasons reported by the graduating seniors are in line with findings in the researcher's literature review and the researcher's conceptual framework. For this question, Senior Participants One, Two, Three and Six mentioned that their involvement in student organizations significantly impacted them and benefited them academically and/or socially. Furthermore, responses from Senior Participants One and Two on protocol questions 3 and 4 also supported that campus involvement positively affected them. Senior Participants One and Three, specifically noted that campus interactions led to academic benefits. Senior Participant Six, specifically noted that campus interactions led to social benefits. The general benefits of

campus involvement using the responses of Senior Participant Two are presented here. The academic and social benefits are presented afterwards.

Senior Participant Two mentioned student involvement in his responses to protocol questions Three, Four, Five and Six. During the interview, the student admitted that his parents "forced" him to attend. CSU. For two years, he said he tolerated CSU, but after joining student organizations, he began to enjoy CSU and become attached. He said, "… the connections I made by being involved with organizations. I didn't want to leave and have to start over with a new slate somewhere else" (July 25, 2017). Senior Participant Two also reported other benefits such as feeling that he was making an impact in the organizations. He said, "I was not really involved in anything in high school. When I started to consider joining organizations at CSU, I saw what had been done so far, and I wanted to do something about it. I got involved to make a change" (July 25, 2017). In addition, Senior Participant Two also perceived that he was treated better by CSU personnel because he was involved. He reported, "…but if a student works on campus, they build better personal relationships with departments where you can work at. Because the student works for them, they want to help the student" (July 25, 2017). The experience of Senior Participant Two corresponds to early retention studies that linked suicide studies to persistence (Durkheim, 1960; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). The main reason is that Senior Participant Two admitted to being "forced" to attend CSU (July 25, 2017). He said. "At first, I only came here because my parents made me. The first two years I didn't want to be here" (July 25, 2017). Senior Participant Two experienced feelings of unhappiness, and part of his unhappiness was due to his decision to purposely resist integrating with CSU.

Like Spady (1970), Tinto used Durkheim's (1961) suicide theory as a basis for his study. Durkheim found that individuals were more likely to commit suicide when they failed to make

personal connections. Tinto asserted that insufficient social integration into college would reduce student commitment to the college and thereby increase the likelihood of withdrawal (Tinto, 1975). Although Senior Participant Two said that his parents would not have supported him transferring to another university, it was evident from the number of times he mentioned student involvement and his detailed responses that his interactions on campus benefitted him emotionally. Whether true or not, Senior Participant Two believed that his campus involvement was linked to being treated well by faculty and staff.

Student Participant Four, in particular, was the most negative respondent of the graduating seniors who the researcher interviewed. Senior Participant Four clearly indicated that the commitment to completing his or her degree was the only reason for persisting at CSU. The researcher noticed that Senior Participant Four did not indicate any positive aspects of CSU at all; nor, did he or she mention having interactions with fellow students. In regard to all of the protocol questions, Senior Participant Four did not mention any campus involvement. There was no mention of participating with student organizations, proactively connecting with anyone, or studying with anyone. Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory, Tinto's later work (1987; 1993; 2012) and studies citing Tinto (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2011; Seidman, 2012) purported that lack of involvement can lead to disdain for the institution. Senior Participant Four inability or unwillingness to interact on campus is congruent with Tinto's findings.

Senior Participant One, Two, Three, and Eight mentioned that rapport with one or more faculty members was a key reason for persisting at CSU. Correspondingly, negative interactions with one or more faculty members bore out to be a reason why Senior Participant Four contemplated withdrawing. Senior Participants One and Five did not consider withdrawing, but

they were considerably frustrated. However, each indicated that another faculty member took the initiative to compensate for other CSU employees who the students felt harmed them.

Senior Participant One reported that she was determined to remain at CSU because her involvement with student organizations and proactive engagements with faculty offered payoffs that would last after graduation. She stated that she had impressed faculty members through her matriculation. She said, "I have a resume. I know that when I apply for a job, I will get it. I know I have people that will write me letters of recommendation. I know I will have some type of back up to help me after I graduate" (July 25, 2017). Furthermore, Senior Participant One believed that she would not have had the experience at another university.

Senior Participant Three also indicated that the rapport he built with certain faculty influenced his persistence. He said, "I knew I could go to them, and they had my best interest in mind. That's ultimately why I wanted to stay. I considered going to bigger universities, but I didn't know if I could reach that same level of relationship" (July 25, 2017). The staff commitment to the students which is helped by the size of the school is ultimately why I chose to stay at CSU" (July 25, 2017). Senior Participant Eight also stated "The one-one-one opportunities with my professors. I felt I could not duplicate rapport somewhere else" (August 14, 2017). Senior Participant Three clearly indicated his or her persistence was influenced by personal relationships and interactions.

On this question and on the previous protocol question, Senior Participant 2 drew a distinction among classifications of instructors. He drew distinctions between full-time and part-time instructors as well as distinctions between instructors of general courses opposed to instructors of courses within his major. He praised his more recent interactions with faculty, not those within his first two years at CSU. "The last two years where you meet the teachers that

care that were more friendly and actually are committed to your education made a difference"
(July 25, 2017). On protocol question 4, he said. "Like in some departments, there are very few
teachers. You only spend an hour and a half with them…In some departments, the typical
teacher is not as encouraging. There is no rapport" (July 25, 2017). The responses support the
influence of relationships with instructors on persistence.

While positive interactions were mentioned as a reason to stay enrolled, negative
interactions were mentioned as a reason to withdraw. Senior Participant Four said he or she
considered leaving CSU because of a faculty member.

> I have only thought about withdrawing from CSU once, because my advisor told me I
> would graduate a year sooner than I am actually graduating. It made me very irritated and
> I felt like I should leave and try a different school. I decided to tough it out because I am
> already familiar with the area and the program I am in (July 25, 2017).

Through this protocol question 5 and other protocol questions, Senior Participants One
and Five reported that negative faculty interactions frustrated them, but another faculty member
made up for it.

Senior Participant One is the same student who reflected upon having a strong resume at
CSU, but she did relate that she did experience negative interactions along the way.

> Sometimes it does happen where I feel like a professor is not giving me what they should
> give me as my professor, and I am like calling home, saying 'I just can't stand it.' But
> most of the time I can find someone else in my department if it's not my professor, it's
> somebody else who can help me with whatever issue I have…Some of the professors
> didn't work well with me, or I didn't work well with them. I realized it was the major.
> When I changed my major me and those professors clicked immediately. For as far as

leaving I knew CSU was where I wanted to be. That wasn't the issue. I just needed to

find my place here (July 25, 2017).

Senior Participant Five also mentioned on another protocol questions that personal

interactions with faculty who went assisted her through disappointments positively turned around

negative situations.

I have had some teachers that truly care for their students and want to see them succeed.

CSU does have some great faculty members that are persistent in the way that they care

for every student on campus. Some of them truly push us. For that I am so grateful to

CSU… I vented some of my problems to two teachers on campus that I now see as my

mentors that help me through my rough times and trials and tribulations with life and

school (July 31, 2017).

On protocol question 3, Senior Participant Five was especially complimentary of a

faculty advisor.

My faculty advisor was very in tune with helping his students succeed. He only wants the

best and actively engaged us in conversations related to our schooling and our majors. He

even went as far as to help us look into internships and seeking out next steps after

graduation. You could see that he really wanted to give us all the tools to succeed (July

31, 2017).

Senior Participant Three praised faculty, but he admitted he did lean on his mother at

some point.

I did find myself in situation that I found that my professor could have found done a

better job of working with me as far as understanding the material, and I had to reach out

to my mom and ask her about the different strategies she used to get through certain

classes (July 25, 2017).

Senior Participant Six and Eight mentioned depended on other students. Senior

Participant Six stated, "…the teacher I had was part time. I didn't feel like she or he wanted to

talk after class. I had to rely on study groups." Senior Participant Eight revealed:

Sometimes, I had to discuss with other students in my class because the directions were

not clear. The faculty member seemed unwilling to explain it again. This did not happen

a lot though over four years (August 14, 2017).

The responses in the qualitative interviews supported the importance of peer relationship

in other ways as well. Senior Participants provided answers that supported the importance of

their relationships with other students in regard to adjusting to campus, feeling comfortable in

their identities, facing challenges, and remaining enrolled at CSU. Senior Participant Seven

revealed that feeling at ease about his or her orientation was a key reason for persisting. He or

she stated: "Being gay has subjected me to a lot discrimination, but CSU has been a safe haven

because everyone is open to accepting others" (August 1, 2017). On protocol question 7, the

same students indicated that she or he experienced a tough professor, but personal relationships

trumped leaving CSU where she or he was "otherwise comfortable" (August 1, 2017). Senior

Participant Eight also revealed her comfort level. "Being a woman is not easy. A lot of women

are underestimated, but at CSU women are awarded the same opportunities" (August 14, 2017).

Two students who upon observation by the researcher appeared to be African-American said

they felt comfortable as well. Senior Participant Five revealed, "I believe CSU provided me with

equal education and fulfillment in a degree as everyone else was offered" (July 31, 2017). Senior

Participant Six made an assumption about racism, but found CSU to be welcoming. He stated,

"…I also enjoyed being involved with organizations. I made friends" (July 31, 2017).

Furthermore, he said:

> I thought that because CSU was a good institution there would be racism behind the
> scenes. I have seen on TV and in social media. A lot of good have racism behind the
> scenes, but I never experienced any. Everyone is treated equally (July 31, 2017).

Senior Participant One, who revealed her race within her answer, credits CSU for giving
her a chance:

> I think they go out of their way to bring people together. They help you get used to it. I
> come from a city where a lot of people aren't always together, so when I got here, I
> noticed it was close knit. It opened me up and gave me a chance to see people in the
> LGBQT community who I was not familiar with and white people and others. I liked it. I
> think they did a good job of introducing me to stuff I didn't know before I got here (July
> 25, 2017).

Other Senior Participants answered the question without explicitly revealing unique
characteristics about themselves and praised CSU for supporting diversity.

Senior Participant Two responded:

> I noticed that the diversity peer educators identified the diverse student population.
> People could write stuff on the walls, and they had a week of silence with poster board in
> the lobby with different labels. The labels described what the labels are and people that
> associate themselves with that classification. I learned a lot about people that week (July
> 25, 2017).

Senior Participant Three reported that CSU is generally tolerant, but implied that it may not extend to all areas of CSU:

I think that CSU does a good job of promoting different types of identities and being comfortable with that identity regardless of what that identity is for each individual. I do think that it could be better embraced by not only the students but by the administration around campus. I notice that Student Life personnel are very aware of it, but the more I go around campus that even though there's a good population of faculty, students and administration that buy into acceptance and tolerance…they get it and they think it's a good thing. I think it's a good thing, but it could be better" (July 25, 2017).

Senior Participant Four was the one student who answered all of the questions negatively. He or she stated, "I never made it a point to attempt to recognize what extent CSU may have demonstrated a commitment to my identity in any terms" (July 25, 2017). This student did not indicate involvement in academic or social organizations at CSU. Rigali-Oiler and Kurpis (2013) connected Tinto's interactionalist theory to their study of racial and ethnic minorities in higher education.

Other Senior Participants credited CSU for encouraging tolerance. Senior Participant Seven identified him or herself as gay. The response of the students aligned with the researcher's literature review regarding gender expression and sexual orientation. Researchers studying modern student populations indicate the importance of recognizing the needs of students who identified or expressed themselves other than what were traditional male and female characteristics and behaviors (Renn & Reason, 2013; Seelman, 2014; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016).   Senior Participant Seven reported feeling "safe" at CSU (August 1, 2017).

Senior Participants Two, Six, Eight reported their affinity for CSU, but they also admitted very practical reasons for persisting. Senior Participant Two came to like CSU after joining organizations, but his first two years of persistence were simply because his parents would not support him going to any other institution. In another answer, Senior Participant Two indicated that he works part-time and implied that he lives at home with his parents. Senior Participant Five also persisted for practical reasons initially, she said she was unwilling to obtain student loans when she could attend CSU while staying at home with her parents. Additionally, Senior Participant Six revealed his scholarship afforded him the opportunity to attend college "almost free" (July 31, 2017). Senior Participant Six implied in another response that he is from the Columbus, Georgia area. Thus, he may also live with parents.

The responses from Senior Participants Two, Five, and Six suggested affordability of CSU was a main reason for persisting. Part of the affordability of CSU for them was the ability to live with their parents. Since the pioneering study of retention in the 1930s by McNeely, financial resources have always been a factor in student persistence. In 1965, the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided financial aid and campus support for students (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Additionally, more than six million students received Pell grants to attend college (Mullin & Philippe, 2011). Students who could not afford to pay for their degree without financial aid often persist as they were obtaining passing grades despite whether they were enjoying the institution (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Renn & Reason, 2013; Tinto, 1975). Affordability remained a central reason for persistence.

Seven of the eight students responded with mostly positive answers regarding their time at CSU or what Senior Participant Eight referred to as "part of life" (August 14, 2017).

She stated:

> I think CSU is like any other place in that respect. Any school or any business. You're going to have nice people and not-so-nice people. People who care and people who are just doing the job. I think it's a part of life that we have to get used to and not expect people to be caring just because we are students. People aren't going to be caring everywhere you go in life. I think that's what college is supposed to teach you, too

However, Senior Participant Four was very clear that he or she persisted at CSU only because he or she wanted the degree. Throughout the interview, the graduating senior answered with unrelenting frustration. The summary of her reason for persistence was:

> My overall reason is that I have been in school too long to drop out and give up now. I only have one more semester at CSU and I want to be able to say I finished (July 25, 2017).

Senior Participant Four was the only student whose responses without equivocation supported Tinto's (1975) assertion that a students' commitment to obtaining a degree at the same institution could outweigh all other factors. In this case, Senior Participant's Four commitment to earning a degree trumped negative interactions.

The researcher summarized the answers below in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7

Graduating Seniors Reasons for Persisting

Reasons for Persisting	Frequency of Answer
Highly Involved with CSU	4
Developed rapport with faculty	3
Strong relationships with peers	2
Financial (CSU tuition, scholarship, live with parents)	3
Dedicated to degree only (Not thrilled with CSU)	1
Some students gave more than one answer.	

Choosing Columbus State University

Research Question 2. What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend

CSU?

Table 4.2 is the visual representation of the responses from incoming freshmen to

Questions 8-17 through which the researcher asked the extent to which certain factors influenced

the decision to choose CSU according to a Likert scale using A-D choices (a. very much, b.

much, c. somewhat, D. It did not play a role). The researcher also presented Table 4.4 which

summarized the responses to Question 20, the overall reason incoming freshmen chose CSU.

Additionally, in the Findings section, the researcher presented verbatim transcription of the

responses from Interview protocol question 5.

The researcher used Table 4.8 to present the percentage of students who indicated that

certain factors influenced their decision to choose CSU as "very much," "much" or "somewhat."

Table 4.8

Likert-Scale Results of Factors Influencing Incoming Freshmen Decision to Choose CSU

Influential Factor	Percentage of Students Choosing whether the factor influenced them
Closeness to Home	84
Student Support Services	69
Customer Service	79
Academic Resources	75
Focus on First Year Students	73
Campus Housing	55
Student-Faculty Ratio	65
Student Organizations	65
Tolerance of Religion	41
Tolerance of LGBT	36

Through Table 4.8, the researcher presented the extent to which certain factors influenced fthe incoming freshmen decision to choose CSU. CSU's location relative to the students' home was the top factor among the respondents with 84 percent reporting. The next most influential factor was the friendliness or customer service the incoming freshmen stated they experiences prior to attending a single class. The friendliness or customer service experienced during the application process influenced 79 percent of the students who responded to the questionnaire. The perceived academic resources available at CSU was an influential factor. According to the responses 75 percent of the students reported that they were influence by hearing about CSU's library, tutoring writing lab, math lab, other academic resources. A large number of students, 73 percent of the students indicated that the special focus on first-year students such as ROAR, First Year Experience and Student Success Courses influenced their decision to choose CSU. Additionally, 69 percent of the students reported that student support services such as counseling, disability services, health services and international student services persuaded them to choose CSU. Student Faculty Ratio and Student Organizations were both valued by students at the same level with 65 percent of students reporting those aspects of CSU as influential factors. More than half of the respondents, 55 percent, reported the availability of campus housing played a role in why they chose CSU. Tolerance of their religious choices was important to 41 percent of the students who responded to the questionnaire, and tolerance of LGBT expression influenced 36 percent of respondents.

Earlier in the chapter, the researcher used Table 4.4 to visually expressed the findings from Question 20 on the quantitative questionnaire by which students could write in their overall reason for choosing CSU. Through Table 4.9, the researcher visually expressed the findings from Protocol Question 5 by which students in focus groups were asked for their overall reason

for choosing CSU. In Table 4.10, the researcher consolidated those reasons. The researcher

presents Table 4.4 again, followed by Table 4.9 and Table 4.10.

Table 4.4

Overall Reason for Choosing CSU

Response to Question 20	Frequency of Answer
CSU was close to home	28
CSU offered my major	10
CSU felt right	11
CSU met my needs after comparison	7
CSU has reputation for quality education	7
CSU offered me a scholarship	5
Nothing specific about CSU	5
My parents forced me to attend CSU	4
CSU tuition	3
CSU provides various opportunities	2
CSU facilities	1

Some students wrote more than one answer.

Table 4.9

Overall Reason for Choosing CSU

Response to Protocol Question 5	Frequency of Answer
CSU tuition	4
CSU offered my major	3
CSU was close to home	2
CSU has reputation for quality education	2
CSU met my needs after comparison	1
CSU offered me a scholarship	1
CSU was my first choice	1

Some students gave more than one answer.

Table 4.10

Consolidation of Tables 4.4 and 4.8

Common Responses	Frequency of Answer
CSU was close to home	30
CSU offered my major	13
CSU felt right	11
CSU has reputation for quality education	9
CSU met my needs after comparison	8
CSU tuition	7
CSU offered me a scholarship	6
Nothing specific about CSU	5
My parents forced me to attend CSU	4
CSU provides various opportunities	2
CSU facilities	1
CSU was my first choice	1

Some students gave more than one answer.

Research Question 2 (What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend CSU?) is important to the dissertation study of the examination of factors affecting student persistence because the reasons students persist or withdraw is sometimes connected to the reasons they came. Tinto (1996) identified at least seven factors related to dropping out. Those factors were academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, uncertainty, narrow or new goals, external commitment, financial concerns, lack of student-institution fit, and isolation from campus life (DeAngelo, 2014).

      The reasons in Table 4.9 connect to each of those factors. The number one reason for choosing CSU was closeness to home. Being close to home can have benefits and detriments which may affect Tinto's named factors such as academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, external commitment, lack of student-institution fit, and isolation for campus. With some students, living at home could hinder the ability of students to acclimate to college if parents continue require students to assist with chores, care for family members, and maintain the

schedules the students kept when they were younger (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011). Lightweis (2014) found that some students who commuted often had less time to participate in study groups or participate in campus event. The practical reason of affordability due to CSU tuition and/or the benefit of having a scholarship correspond to financial concerns (Tinto, 1996).

The other factors the incoming freshmen reported as well as their overall reasons for choosing CSU supported points made by Kalsbeek (2013a, 2013b) who asserts that students choose a university based on the promises made to them through marketing, recruitment and orientation as well as assurances made to students by faculty and staff. Kalsbeek (2013a, 2013b) asserted that campus leaders review the institution's promises, meaning the brand, language, and values used to market the institution to students (2013a, p. 11). If students perceived that the institution did not live up to the promises, students felt misled by the institution (Kalsbeek, 2013a). Kalsbeek (2013b) explained that student dissatisfaction increases risk of attrition and diminishes the institution's "brand promise and distinctiveness" (p. 54).

Relationships Among the Responses of Incoming Freshmen and Graduating Seniors

Inclusive of race, gender, and socioeconomic background, an overwhelming majority of high school students indicate they expect to apply to attend college (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011). In this study, the researcher was able to study a cross-section of incoming freshmen and graduating seniors differing in race, age, gender, sexual orientation, pre-college academic and social experiences, financial need as well as health challenges and disability. In depth detail revealed the students also varied in terms of majors, student leadership experience, and coping skills. The diversity of the sample benefits the study because the sample reflects many subgroups of the student population.

Relationships Between Choosing CSU and Persisting at CSU

Research Question 3. Is there a relationship between the reasons students give for choosing CSU and the reasons students give for persisting at CSU?

There are relationships between the responses from incoming freshmen and graduating seniors in regard to the affordability of CSU. Both incoming freshmen and graduating seniors mentioned CSU tuition, scholarships, the ability to live at home. Additionally, there were incoming freshmen who indicated that their parents did not give the any other option for college besides CSU. There was also a graduating senior who indicated his parents would not support him attending another university. Two students indicated a need to be near family for disability and health reasons.

A number of incoming freshmen reported that CSU "felt right, CSU offered their major, and CSU "met their needs" after they compared CSU to other universities. Student-Institution Fit is a primary factor in Tinto's (1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012) theories. The majority of the incoming freshmen, 81 percent reported that they are not first generation college students. Having parents who attended college may have assisted them with the factors they used to compare institutions (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Conley, 2008; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Additionally, one graduating senior revealed his mother had been essential to him when he took a course she had taken in college.

Student-Institution Fit could translate to several categories for persisting at CSU including the four mentioned by the graduating seniors in the study which are academic and social benefits of being involved in campus organizations, the development of positive relationships with faculty, and strong friendships with peers. Specifically, the incoming freshmen who mentioned they chose CSU based on the various opportunities that CSU offered may be the students who will sound like the seven of the eight graduating seniors interviewed by the

researcher. Seven of the graduating senior reported the significance of campus involvement on their decision to persist. A student identifying as gay called CSU a "safe haven" (Senior Participant 7, August 1, 2017). Other graduating seniors praised the Student Life personnel for activities celebrating diversity, tolerance and acceptance. Graduating seniors reported helpfulness of faculty, especially in their major. Despite experiencing some negativity along the way, seven of the eight graduating seniors discussed taking advantage of opportunities to interact with faculty, staff, or peers and highlighted those interactions as contributing to their persistence.

On the contrary, negative interactions could lead to a lack of Student-Institution Fit and become fuel to withdraw (Kalsbeek, 2013a, 2013b). Negative experience can be mitigated through coping skills learned through pre-college experiences or fostered in households where students parents attended (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Conley, 2008; Lightweis, 2014; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Most of the incoming freshmen, 84 percent, reported they were not first generation college students. While some students are able to navigate through college, other students are less capable of managing stress (Conley, 2008; Castro, 2013; Kaslbeek, 2013a). Kalsbeek (2013b) emphasized the importance of ensuring students experience the university they were promised when they were recruited.

Lastly, there were incoming freshmen who reported they did not have any specific reason for attending CSU and there was one graduating senior who disenchanted at CSU, never mentioned any involvements at CSU, and only persisted at CSU to obtain a degree. Incidentally, there were four incoming students who reported a weak commitment to obtaining their degree and ten incoming freshmen who reported a weak commitment to CSU. They are likely to be at-risk for withdrawing from CSU.

Persistence vs. Retention

While analyzing and summarizing the data and responses of the incoming CSU freshmen and graduating CSU seniors, the researcher noticed some of those reasons. In other studies, some of the reasons that attributed to attrition among college students were: lack of campus involvement due to commuting or holding a part-time job, real or perceived lack of commitment from faculty, real or perceived lack of respect from staff. Senior Participant 4 said, "Universities like CSU are businesses and are more concerned with numbers than people" (July 25, 2017). Although Senior Participant 4 was more negative than the other graduating seniors interviewed, the others indicated they faced some challenges at CSU. Half of them specifically mentioned problems with Financial Aid employees and financial aid processes.

In regard to better understanding why CSU student persist, the researcher also found some reasons why some CSU students do not persist. Future studies of CSU may include researching the graduation rate for students who commute to CSU, the percentage of students who are actively involved in campus organizations, the pass rate of classes taught by part-time instructors, and student perception of the Financial Aid Office. Applications of this study or future studies may include intensified promotion of the benefits of developing rapport with faculty, intensified promotion of the benefits of participating in student organizations or attending campus activities. More pointedly, the researcher found the appropriateness of Kalsbeek (2013a, 2013b) suggestion for higher education leaders to use and instruction-wide approach to retention. Without it, incoming freshmen can be swept up in the euphoria of the marketing, but later suffer from what they deem to be insurmountable challenges from faculty, staff, or the processes of matriculation.

Summary

The researcher sought to obtain a better understanding of the factors influencing student persistence at CSU. Through a mixed method strategy, the researcher found that graduating seniors' main reasons for persisting at CSU were congruent with Tinto's interactionalist theory. The graduating seniors were effusive about being highly involved in campus organizations, developing rapport with faculty, peer interactions, and remaining committed to their goal of graduating regardless of challenges.

Research Question 1

Being involved in student organizations resulted in academic benefits such as opportunities to spend more time with faculty or staff, obtain extra assistance from faculty, and build rapport with faculty. Students reported that the one-on-one time with faculty significantly influenced their decision to stay. Additionally, they reported confidence in receiving letters of recommendation and possibly support from faculty or staff after graduating. Some graduating seniors reported feeling they were making an impact in the organization or the campus. They took on leadership roles and reported experience positive emotions about their accomplishments as well as the ability to include those accomplishments on their resumes. They felt that they could not recreate their experiences at another university or develop the same level of rapport with faculty or staff at another university, especially a bigger university.

Some graduating seniors reported developing rapport apart from being involved in organizations. The graduating seniors mentioned faculty members ensuring students were ready for their careers, assisting them with internships, and investigating postgraduate opportunities for the students. One graduating senior mentioned proactively sharing personal issues with faculty members. In return, the faculty members became sounding boards and mentors for her. Relationships with instructors were cited as reasons graduated seniors persisted.

Relationships with peers affected whether students persisted as well. A student who revealed being gay felt comfortable at CSU. Due to the sensitivity of sexual orientation, the student was unwilling to withdraw. The personal relationships provide stability for the student.

The commitment to earning a degree was the only reason Senior Participant 4 student persisted at CSU. He or she indicated negative experiences at CSU that resulted in disenchantment. Other graduating seniors mentioned they were committed to earning a degree and might have thought briefly about withdrawing, but they would never pursue it. The commitment to degree was a significant factor but it was not framed by the negativity of Senior Participant 4.

Affordability along with other positive aspects of CSU was a practical reason for remaining at CSU. The cost of tuition, having a scholarship, and being able to live at home were cited as important factors.

Research Question 2

Overwhelmingly, the incoming freshmen cited closeness to home as the main factor influencing their decision to choose CSU. The researcher measured 10 factors on a Likert-scale using A-D choices (a. very much, b. much, c. somewhat, d. It did not play a role). These 10 factors were: Closeness to Home, Student Support Services, Customer Service, Academic Resources, Focus on First Year Students, Campus Housing, Student-Faculty Ratio, Student Organizations, Tolerance of Religion, and. Tolerance of LGBT. For eight of the factors, at least 50 percent of the respondents reported that the factors influenced them "very much," "much" or "somewhat." Even for the factors with less than 50 percent response, the response was still strong enough to consider at important factors to consider. Tolerance of their religious choices influenced 41 percent of the students who responded to the questionnaire, and tolerance of LGBT expression influenced 36 percent of respondents.

Research Question 3

The sustaining reasons why graduating seniors gave for persisting at CSU shared some commonalities with the reasons incoming freshmen gave for choosing CSU. The affordability of CSU due to living at home or having a scholarship was one area of overlap.

The perception that CSU was the "right" university for them and the realization by that graduating seniors that CSU had been the "right" university for them is area of overlap. However, the specific reasons would have to be revealed after the freshmen had matriculated. Based on some of the factors in the Likert-scale responses, the researcher concludes that some of the incoming freshmen will capitalize on student-institution fit through becoming involved in campus organizations, the developing positive relationships with faculty, and making friends.

According to the data, 36 percent of the incoming freshmen expressed that LGBT tolerance influenced their decision. Senior Participant 7 stated CSU served as a "safe haven" (August 1, 2017) for him or her as a gay student – an opinion that could be important to that 36 percent. In addition, other graduating seniors mentioned activities designed to promote tolerance and acceptance.

The graduating seniors shared details of negative experiences at CSU which could detrimentally affect the persistence of incoming freshmen, especially some of those who indicated weak commitments to CSU, weak commitment to obtaining their degree, or listed academic resources and student support resources as important factors for choosing CSU. Kalsbeek (2013b) emphasized the importance of ensuring students experience the university they were promised when they were recruited.

The researcher's quantitative questionnaires and qualitative protocol were developed from the researcher's literature review and conceptual framework. The conceptual framework for the study emerges from three key ideas from Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 1996, and 2012) and

Kalsbeek (2013a, 2013b): (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems and (3) the institutional approach to improving retention. The reasons given by the graduating senior for persisting at CSU were congruent with Tinto's interactionalist theory. In his original 1975 theory, Tinto linked retention to the students' ability to successfully integrate in the academic and social systems of the college and experience success academically and socially. Tinto also to specific individual characteristics of students upon entry to college such as students' initial commitment to the institution and initial commitment to the goal of graduating. These factors bore out in the researcher's study of CSU students. In regard to the researcher's interest in exploring whether an institutional approach to retention has value as suggested by Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b), the researcher found that incoming freshmen chose CSU primarily because of its location, but also because of promises made to them during the admissions, registration, and orientation process to include presentations, conversations, and marketing material. Moreover, many responses of the graduating seniors reported persisting at CSU based on positive experiences linked to promises fulfilled by CSU faculty, staff, and programs or departments coordinated by CSU faculty and staff. Correspondingly, some graduating seniors reported contemplating withdrawing from CSU, experiencing disappointment, and seeking on-campus and off-campus assistance and relying on coping mechanisms due to negative experiences at CSU faculty, staff, or processes. These responses fell in line with Kalsbeek's (2013a; 2013b) assertions that students choose an institution based on the marketing and recruiting efforts and when student perceive that promises have been broken, they contemplate withdrawing. The researcher's findings provide a rationale for CSU leadership to consider the value of an institutional approach to retention. A strategic institutional approach could provide cohesion

among faculty, staff, and students and improve CSU's six-year graduation rate above 30 percent where it has remained since 2005.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

More than 20 million students are enrolled in higher education nationwide, but among the 4700 institutions of higher education, student attrition rates are between 30 and 50 percent (O'Keefe, 2013). Officials in the Department of Education indicate that postsecondary credentials are necessary for the fastest-growing job opportunities as well as the better paying ones and that information is marketed to high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In a five-year period, students who do not complete college cost $6.2 billion in state appropriations; $1.4 billion in state grants and $1.5 billion in federal grants (American Institutes of Research, 2010). Additionally, postsecondary credentials significantly reduced likelihoods of dependence on social services, adverse health, and incarceration (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013).

Additionally, having a better understanding of persistence factors affecting an institution's student population may become vital for funding. Some form of performance-based funding is in place in 32 states (National Conference of State Legislature, 2017). Georgia is in transition and policymakers are considering the following evaluation factors for Georgia: "student progression; degrees conferred; success of low-income and adult learners; and institution specific measures to account for different missions and strategic initiatives" (National Conference of State Legislature, n.p., 2017). Thus, persistence is important to individuals, institutions of higher learning as well as the federal government (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; Walker, & Florea, 2014). The researcher proposed to examine the sustaining reasons CSU students persist to degree completion.

The researcher reviewed a 2005 report on retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) rates written by a CSU task force and also reviewed the CSU website for updated information.

Finding that the six-year graduation rate at Columbus State University has remained at 30%

since 2005, the researcher intended to reduce the gap in RPG studies at CSU. The 2005 Task

Force report did not answer why students persist, was based largely on quantitative data,

indicated inconclusive information requiring further study, and recommended activities and

support for freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. The researcher sought to better understand why

30 percent of students persist and uncover possible reasons that 70 percent do not persist and

developed research questions from the literature review. The following research questions guided

the study.

1. What are the reasons graduating CSU students give for persisting at CSU?

2. What are the reasons incoming CSU students give for choosing to attend CSU?

3. Is there a relationship between the reasons students give for choosing CSU and the

reasons students give for persisting at CSU?

The researcher designed the study to contribute to the field of study on persistence,

persistence scholarship at CSU, and provide information to CSU leadership, faculty and staff that

may benefit efforts to reach and retain students. For the study, the researcher selected two

categories of CSU students based on the strategies of researchers who suggested strategies for

studying a sample that met the requirements of specific research questions. Therefore, the

researcher selected two categories of students: students who are about to begin their first

semester as CSU, and students who are about to graduate from CSU. The researcher employed

features of cluster sampling and purposive sampling through modified snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling involved asking an individual familiar with the group the researcher wanted

to study, as well as asking for referrals from members of the selected groups.

The researcher's sample was diverse in regard to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, pre-college academic and social experiences, financial need as well as health challenges and disability. The 88 students identified as African-Americans, Asians, Caucasians, Hispanics, Biracial students, and "Other." In addition, there were students who indicated they had disability, health issues and financial need. Students also indicated that tolerance of religious views, LGBT expression, and access to campus resources to support them academically and socially were reasons they chose CSU. In depth analysis revealed the students differed in terms of majors, student leadership experience, and coping skills.

Phase one was quantitative and phase two was qualitative. The researcher's phase one consisted of a quantitative survey of multiple-choice questions to obtain demographic information, multiple choice questions addressing the reasons incoming freshmen chose to attend CSU according to a 4-point Likert scale, and one area for a free response to capture a reason not provided on the prewritten questionnaire. The incoming freshmen who received the questionnaire were newly-admitted freshmen participating in the CSU ROAR (Recruitment, Orientation, Advisement, Registration) program during the summer of 2017.

The phase consisted of a focus group with freshmen students and individual interviews with graduating seniors. The incoming freshmen who agreed to participate in the focus group were students who had participated in the ROAR program during the summer of 2017. The graduating seniors who participated were students who had heard about the invitation to participate in a focus group or interview from emails initiated by a CSU faculty member. Other graduating seniors heard about the researcher's study from both the ROAR coordinator older students who were assisting with ROAR activities.

The qualitative interview protocol consisted of five questions for the newly-admitted freshmen. The five questions were related to (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems (3) institutional approaches and (4) the CSU Mission Statement. The researcher asked similar questions of the graduating seniors as well as two additional questions addressing stress level at and whether they seriously considered withdrawing at one point in their matriculation. The interview protocol used with the incoming freshmen and graduating seniors were based on factors the researcher found while reviewing previous studies.

The findings of the study were congruent with Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993, 1996 and 2012) long-lasting interactionalist theory and his revisions which are inclusive of changing demographics among college students. In addition, the reasons incoming students gave for choosing CSU shed light on the high expectations some CSU freshmen have going into their college career. Moreover, the reasons graduating students gave for persisting demonstrated a need for students to draw upon coping mechanisms or their commitment to goals in order to handle those times when high expectations cannot be realized. The gap between expectations and reality was helpful to understanding persistence and thereby retention of CSU students. Although no person or organization could possibly be all things to all people, it was important to evaluate the gap between expectations and reality to determine whether Kalsbeek's (2013a; 2013b) suggestion for higher education leaders to implement an institutional approach to retention has merit.

Discussion of Findings

The researchers' conceptual framework consisted of Tinto's (1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; and 2012) theories and Kalsbeek's (2013a; 2013b) institutional approach to retention. Tinto is the most prolific writer on persistence and retention in the field of higher education and hundreds of researchers have used his interactionalist theory as a foundation for their own studies (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2011; Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Seidman, 2012). In revisions to his theory, Tinto (1987; 1993; 2012) included propositions corresponding to changing demographic among student populations as well as the changing demands upon institutions of higher education. Additionally, Tinto emphasized the roles of faculty and classroom experiences concerning retention (Tinto 1993; 2012). Specifically, Tinto (2012) reasoned that the lack of integrated efforts among campus personnel contributed to attrition. Tinto (2012) advocated institution-wide retention planning. Kalsbeek (2013a) extended Tinto's (2012) ideas of inclusion and crafted an institutional approach to retention. Kalsbeek (2013a) called his framework, the "4 Ps" and the "Ps" stand for profile, progress, process, and promise. According to Kalsbeek (2013a), educators typically focus initiatives and programs on students identified as highly likely to struggle or withdraw, but Kalsbeek maintained that educators should implement an institutional approach benefitting all students including those who historically struggle to persist to degree completion.

Research Question 1: Reasons for Persisting at CSU

The researcher found the reasons for persistence to be congruent with Tinto's interactionalist theory and many other researchers from the original literature review who used Tinto as basis for their studies. In his original 1975 theory, Tinto connected retention to academic experiences and social integration, and pointed to specific individual characteristics of students upon entry to college: students' initial commitment to the institution; initial commitment

to the goal of graduating; and the level of integration into the academic and social systems of the college or university (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2011).

Tinto's (1996) identified at least seven factors related to retention: academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, uncertainty, narrow or new goals, external commitment, financial concerns, lack of student-institution fit, and isolation from campus life (DeAngelo, 2014). The researcher's study of CSU graduating senior supported the campus integration aspects of Tinto's interactionalist theory. The graduating seniors emphasized that they persisted because they felt attached to CSU. Being involved in student organizations resulted in academic and social benefits. The graduating seniors reported persisting at CSU because they felt they could not find the same experiences at another university, especially a larger university. Being involved in student organizations resulted in academic benefits such as opportunities to spend more time with faculty or staff, obtain extra assistance from faculty, and build rapport with faculty. Students reported that the one-on-one time with faculty significantly influenced their decision to stay, aligning with findings that out-of-class academic support from faculty was one of the most effective tools to improve student success (Ellertson &Thoennes, 2007; Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Shaw & Matter, 2013). The CSU graduating seniors reported that positive interactions with faculty made them feel valued. Some graduating seniors reported that faculty proactively engaged students. Other graduating seniors stated that they were proactive in developing rapport with the faculty. The graduation seniors reported confidence in receiving letters of recommendation and possibly support from faculty or staff after graduating. Tinto's opined that academic integration was improved persistence.

Responses from the graduating seniors supported what Tinto (1975) called "congruence between the student and the institutional characteristics" (p. 111) or student-institution fit.

Graduating seniors reported feeling that being involved with student organizations in leadership positions allowed them to make a difference. They reported positive feelings about making an impact and adding those accomplishments to their resumes. The graduating seniors stated they were unwilling to risk trying to recreate their success at another university, especially a bigger university.

Interestingly, one graduating senior's negative feeling toward CSU during his freshmen and sophomore years supported Tinto's interactionalist theory because he had isolated himself from campus. The graduating senior revealed his parents made him attend CSU, and for that reason he resisted integrated with CSU. Like Spady (1970), Tinto used Durkheim's (1961) suicide theory as a basis for his study. Durkheim found that individuals were more likely to commit suicide when they failed to make personal connections. Tinto asserted that insufficient social integration into college would reduce student commitment to the college and thereby increase the likelihood of withdrawal (Durkheim, 1960; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). It was clear from the number of times the graduating senior mentioned his involvement with student organizations that his campus interactions caused him to enjoy attending CSU.

Relationships with fellow students also influenced whether students remained at CSU. The responses were congruent with Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 1996, and 2012) as well as studies the researcher found which examined adjustment issues among college students based on their identities. The sample of graduating seniors included whites, non-whites, males, females, and one student who disclosed himself or herself as gay. According to the researcher's literature review, identity formation and moral identity were factors in decision making, commitments, intrinsic motivation, and risk behavior (Hardy, Francis, Zamboanga, Kim, Anderson & Forthun, 2013). In fact, Renn and Reason (2013) found that racial or ethnic minorities considered

dropping out based on how supportive the campus was and their ability to adjust to the campus.

Adapting to change was a heightened challenge for REM students new to the United States

(McGarvey, Brugha, Conroy, Clarke & Byrne, 2015). Seven of the eight CSU graduating seniors

said they felt included and accepted. The seven students who indicated feeling comfortable on

campus included whites, non-whites, and the gay student. One of the graduating seniors

explained that she appreciated the diversity at CSU. It gave her the opportunity to developing

friendships with people from other races and individuals from the LGBT community. Other

graduating seniors credited CSU for its Student Life programs promoting tolerance. The

graduating student who identified as gay stated that one of the reasons he or she persisted at CSU

was certainly because he or she felt comfortable with attending CSU as a gay student, and would

not want to start over at another college and experience any harassment.

The graduating senior who was extremely negative about CSU never mentioned being

involved with student organizations, developing rapport with faculty, or participating in any

activities associated with the campus. The negative responses and lack of involvement at CSU

also support Tinto's theory that students who do no integrate with the institution feel "isolated"

(Tinto; 1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; and 2012). Isolation increases likelihood of withdrawing, and

the graduating senior admitted that he or she would have withdrawn from CSU except for being

too far along in the degree program. Tinto's interactionalist theory accounted for student like this

one as well. In his original theory, Tinto (1975) asserted students' initial commitment to

institution, initial commitment to the goal of graduating were vital factors impacting whether

students would persist to complete degrees. Tinto linked cost-benefit economics concepts as an

additional conceptual framework for the study (Tinto, 1975). The cost-benefit concepts included

in Tinto (1975) explained that students evaluated the cost and benefit of remaining in college

based on cumulative interactions while enrolled. While disenchanted with CSU, the student continued to believe in CSU enough to determine that the degree program at CSU was valuable. He or she was committed to graduating and ultimately refused to transfer.

Financial concerns were also a factor in Tinto's theory, and the cost of higher education is a traditional concern for students (DeAngelo, 2014; Tinto; 1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012). Tuition, scholarships and the ability to live at home were cited as important factors affecting the persistence of the CSU graduating seniors.

Research Question 2: Reasons for Choosing CSU

The researcher designed a quantitative questionnaire for the incoming freshmen which included a Likert-scale measure with A-D choices (a. very much, b. much, c. somewhat, d. It did not play a role). The students were to respond to whether 10 factors affected their decision to choose CSU. The 10 factors were: Closeness to Home, Student Support Services, Customer Service, Academic Resources, Focus on First Year Students, Campus Housing, Student-Faculty Ratio, Student Organizations, Tolerance of Religion, and Tolerance of LGBT. For eight of the factors, at least 50 percent of the respondents reported that the factors influenced them "very much," "much" or "somewhat." Even for the factors with less than 50 percent response, the response was still strong enough to consider at important factors to consider. Tolerance of their religious choices influenced 41 percent of the students who responded to the questionnaire, and tolerance of LGBT expression influenced 36 percent of respondents. The most common reason reported was closeness to home with 84 percent of respondents stating it played a role.

An overwhelming majority, 84 percent, of the incoming freshmen in the study reported they chose CSU because it was close to their home town. Some of them reported they would live at home. Others reported they would live on campus because home was a little too far to commute each day. There were incoming freshmen who implied they would live on campus for

autonomy even though their parents were in Columbus. Choosing to CSU and living on campus can result in the benefits reported by the graduating seniors who successfully integrated at CSU. By living on campus or near campus, students save commuting time and are likely to remain on campus longer to visit with faculty after class, attend CSU activities, build study groups, and participate in student organizations. Most of the incoming freshmen, 84 percent, reported they were not first-generation college students. It is likely the incoming freshmen are prepared for college or their parents can reduce any frustrations by drawing upon their experiences in college (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Conley, 2008; Lightweis, 2014; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009).

Conley (2008) categorized college readiness skills as: cognitive strategies which include analytical and reasoning skills; content knowledge defined as a knowledge base of key content areas; academic behaviors such as self-awareness and time management; and contextual skills and knowledge described as the knowledge and understanding of the college application and admissions process. Researchers found that personal interactions within family and within pre-college social relationships influenced student cognition, emotions and behavior, and thus prepared or under-prepared them for college (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Castro, 2013; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013).

The fact that the 80 incoming freshmen in the study rated the other factors: Student Support Services, Customer Service, Academic Resources, Focus on First Year Students, Campus Housing, Student-Faculty Ratio, Student Organizations, Tolerance of Religion, and Tolerance of LGBT from 36 percent to 79 percent demonstrate the demands on higher education to serve diverse student populations and a variety of needs. The fact supports why persistence

and retention has been studied for more than 80 years and that no singular approach resolves

student retention (Braxton, Doyle & Hartley, 2014).

Turner (2016) found four factors made a difference: overt helpfulness from faculty, one-

on-one meetings with faculty, faculty familiarity with student by name or facial recognition, and

accessibility of faculty in person, by phone, or by email (Turner, 2016). DeAngelo (2014)

contended that developers of first-year experiences should encourage student engagement and

intervene with students who were not engaging with other students as they were among the

group likely to withdraw from college (2014). A secondary finding from DeAngelo's study was

out-of-class engagement among faculty and students. O'Keeffe (2013) asserted that relationships

between students and even one key figure within the university could convince a student to

remain enrolled. He also contended it was not sufficient for an institution to admit students and

expect students to adapt without support.

Students indicated that tolerance and acceptance of the non-cognitive challenges affecting

adjustment to college was important. According to the researcher's study, 36 percent of the

incoming freshmen expressed that LGBT tolerance influenced their decision. Forty-one percent

of incoming freshmen indicated that religious tolerance affected their decision to attend CSU.

Sixty-nine percent indicated that information about CSU's student support services influence

their decision to choose CSU. One student indicated having a disability. O'Keefe (2013)

asserted that challenges with student attrition continued when institutions failed to build

"positive relationships" and fostered a "sense of belonging" for its students, including students

with disabilities, students experiencing mental health challenges and students from ethnic

backgrounds" (O'Keefe, 2013, pp. 609-612). According to a survey of college counselors, ninety

percent of college counselors reported an increase in the number of students seeking counseling

for mental health issues and the college counselors reported an increase in the number of

students indicating they have prescriptions for psychiatric medication (Goldrick-Rab & Cook,

2011). Students identifying or expressing themselves in an alternate way sought "college

counseling services, and reported significantly higher amounts of depressive symptoms, social

anxiety, and eating concerns than their heterosexual peers" and increased likelihood for suicide

attempts (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016, p. 201). Pretending led to feelings of

detachment and lower satisfactions with the college experience (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller

Kwon, 2016). Lower academic achievement and increased likelihood of suicide risk were

additional possible outcomes (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). The number of

reasons that students needed someone to listen to them and refer them to support groups or

highly-trained professionals abound (Goldrick-Rab & Cook 2011; Renn and Reason, 2013).

　　　While some students are able to navigate through college, other students are less capable

of managing stress (Conley, 2008; Castro, 2013, Kalsbeek, 2013a). Kalsbeek (2013b)

emphasized the importance of ensuring students experience the university they were promised

when they were recruited. Most of the CSU incoming freshmen who participated in the study had

a reason for choosing CSU (Six percent indicated they did not have a reason for choosing CSU.)

and were expecting that reason and would be expecting for that reason to remain positive while

they attend.

Research Question 3: Relationships between Persisting and Choosing

The overall reasons for persisting at CSU reported by the graduating seniors supported the Tinto's (1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012) theory that students are more likely to persist when they feel attached to the institution and if they are committed to earning their degree. Many of the factors influencing the decision by incoming freshmen to choose CSU support Kalsbeek's (2013a; 2013b) assertions that students expect to have the experience that was marketed to them during the admissions and registration process.

Other than the practical reason of affordability and closeness to their home town, there was agreement among the incoming freshmen that CSU "felt right," and "met their needs" after they compared CSU to other universities. Because the incoming freshmen had yet to begin their first semester at CSU, the researcher is unable to provide specific relationships between the responses reported by graduating seniors and freshmen. However, based on the responses given on the Likert-Scale questions, the researcher found similarities between the incoming freshmen who mentioned they chose CSU based on the various opportunities offered by CSU and seven of the eight graduating seniors interviewed by the researcher who touted their involvement with student organizations and rapport with faculty as their reasons for persisting. Additionally, one of the graduating seniors identified as gay and called CSU a "safe haven" (Senior Participant 7, August 1, 2017). Other graduating seniors praised the Student Life personnel for activities celebrating diversity, tolerance and acceptance. The opinion correlates with 36 percent of the incoming freshmen who stated that tolerance for LGBT status influenced their decision to choose CSU. One incoming freshman reported having a disability and another incoming freshman noted observing walkways and other amenities for individuals with disabilities. Student-Institution Fit is a primary factor in Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993, and 2012) theories. Kalsbeek (2013a) emphasized that students chose the institution based on the marketing and recruiting efforts of

the institution, and if the institution did not live up to the promises, students felt misled by the institution. Kalsbeek (2013b) explained that student dissatisfaction increases risk of attrition and diminishes the institution's "brand promise and distinctiveness" (p. 54). Responses from the incoming freshmen indicate high expectations for their college years.

Conclusions

The researcher concluded that persistence at CSU increased when students became involved through student activities or student organizations. In addition, the researcher concluded that academic and social benefits occurred when CSU students developed relationships with faculty and with fellow students. The students' responses confirmed the importance of academic and social integration to improving academic progress and career readiness, as well as bolstering social and emotional development. Furthermore, the CSU graduating seniors indicated that academic and social integration balanced negative experiences. The students in the study mitigated the effect of disappointments during college by relying on relationships with faculty or fellow students, savoring feelings of accomplishment from leadership or membership within campus organizations, or weighing previous positive moments against a negative moment. A CSU student who resisted becoming involved or developing relationships provided pessimistic responses in the study, revealed feeling disconnected, was critical of people and processes, and admitted to contemplating withdrawing. The commitment to earning a degree was the sole reason for that particular graduating senior to persist at CSU.

The researcher concluded that CSU has a geographic claim to a certain number of square miles surrounding Columbus, Georgia because practical attributes of CSU such as location, tuition, and availability of scholarships were significant influential factors to the graduating seniors. These features are longstanding reasons for persistence within the literature review and

bore out in the study. The researcher concluded the overwhelming response from incoming freshmen that location was the primary reason for choosing CSU lends itself to a recommendation for marketing.

The researcher concluded that Student Life and campus programs are critical factors positively affecting persistence at CSU. Graduating CSU seniors mentioned that their involvement in student organizations significantly impacted them and benefited them academically and/or socially. The CSU graduating seniors reported feelings of connectedness to faculty, obtaining extra assistance from faculty, and improved rapport with faculty to discuss career readiness, comfort and discomfort with their major. The CSU graduating seniors also stated that campus involvement brought them to the attention of faculty and staff which assisted them with obtaining letters of recommendation and opportunities to add to their resume. The CSU graduating seniors also cited social benefits of being proactively involved at CSU. Some graduating seniors reported feeling they were making an impact in the organizations or broadly around campus due to their involvement in organizations. The seniors stated indicated that leadership roles provided them with positive emotions about their accomplishments. Several seniors reported they persisted at CSU because they did not believe they could recreate their experiences at another university or develop the same level of rapport with faculty or staff at another university, especially a bigger university.

The researcher concluded that student interactions with faculty and staff and a climate of acceptance conducive for making friends positively impacted persistence at CSU. Positive interactions with faculty and peers in and out of the classroom also influenced persistence. Some graduating seniors reported developing rapport with faculty apart from being involved in organizations, but through one-on-one time faculty members. One graduating senior mentioned

faculty members listening to her share personal challenges and serving as mentors. Relationships with instructors were cited as reasons graduated seniors persisted as well as relationships with peers. A student who identified as gay specifically reported feeling comfortable at CSU and stated he or she was unwilling to transfer to another institution. Other graduation seniors indicated CSU provided a climate of acceptance for people of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientation, gender expression and disability. Within and apart from campus organizations, graduating seniors reported that personal relationships and friendships made a difference. They reported that they did not want to start over at another university and lose connections to friends.

The researcher concluded that the students who reported perceiving unfriendliness and frustration with administrative processes negatively affected persistence of CSU students. In 80 years of retention studies, retention and persistence had been viewed as a function of Student Affairs personnel, but the study bears out that the Academic Affairs including faculty and Business Office staff can negatively impact efforts to keep students enrolled. One student reported that instructors of first-year and second-year students and part-time instructors were less committed to students than instructors of courses within his major of full-time instructors. The graduating seniors who reported experienced frustration at various times at CSU reported feeling undervalued by some faculty and some staff.

Lastly, the researcher concluded that the incoming freshmen who offered no specific reason for choosing CSU were likely to leave CSU before graduating. Tinto (1975) asserted that insufficient social integration into college would reduce student commitment to the college and thereby increase the likelihood of withdrawing from the institution. The researcher found a relationship between the negative experiences cited by graduating seniors and the incoming freshmen who indicated weak commitment to CSU and weak commitment to obtaining a degree.

The CSU students who developed attachment to CSU reported using coping mechanisms to deal with negative experiences at CSU. However, one graduating senior who simply attended class and came home each day reported negative feelings toward CSU and was highly critical of CSU. The graduating senior indicated he or she was persisting to an obtain a degree only and did not like CSU. Additionally, the researcher also found relevance to Tinto's assertions regarding insufficient social integration within the responses of a graduating senior whose parents told him that he could only attend CSU. The student reported feeling disdain toward CSU because he lacked the ability to choose which college he wanted to attend. The student revealed that for two years he disliked CSU until he began to join student organizations. Eventually, he served as a leader and reported positive emotions regarding his last two years at CSU. These examples support the significance of integrating with the campus. Attachment to CSU grew when students became involved with campus organizations, participated in activities, made friends, and talked with faculty members outside of the classroom.

The conclusions of the study supported the researcher's conceptual framework which consisted of three key ideas from Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993; 1996; 2012) and Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b): (1) characteristics of students upon enrollment into an institution of higher education, (2) student interactions with peers, campus personnel, and campus systems and (3) the institutional approach to improving retention. The researcher concluded that Tinto (2012) was correct to add faculty and classroom experiences and advocate institution-wide planning in more recent persistence and retention works. Kalsbeek (2013a) pointed out the problems of disjointed approaches to retention planning and extended Tinto's (2012) ideas of inclusion and crafted an institutional approach to retention. The reasons given by the graduating senior for persisting at CSU were congruent with Tinto's interactionalist theory. The graduating CSU students

participating in the study confirmed assertions from Tinto's theory which linked retention to the students' ability to successfully integrate in the academic and social systems of the college and experience success academically and socially, as well as initial commitment to the institution and initial commitment to the goal of graduating.

Regarding the researcher's interest in exploring whether an institutional approach to retention has value as suggested by Kalsbeek (2013a; 2013b), the researcher found that incoming freshmen chose CSU primarily because of its location, but also because of marketing materials, presentations by recruiters, and conversations with CSU personnel. The incoming freshmen listed the promises as expected experiences while attending CSU. Additionally, graduating seniors reported persisting at CSU based on promises kept by CSU faculty and staff, as well as positive experiences on campus or through campus affiliations. Conversely, some graduating seniors reported contemplating withdrawing from CSU after experiencing disappointment or frustration with CSU faculty, staff, or process. These responses validate Kalsbeek's (2013a; 2013b) assertions that students choose an institution based on the marketing and recruiting efforts and when institutions fail to meet expectations, students are dissatisfied and think about withdrawing.

The conclusions provide a rationale for considering an institutional approach to retention. A strategic institutional approach integrates efforts among faculty and staff across campus and bonds the campus through unified goals and shared accountability for holding on to students. The researcher found that CSU recruiters market the university well and incoming freshmen indicated high expectations, but graduating students reported incidences when expectations were not met. The researcher's conclusions should be reviewed by CSU enrollment managers as

current data useful for boosting CSU's six-year graduation rate above 30 percent where it has remained since 2005.

Relationship to Other Research

Beyond the conceptual framework, the researcher's findings and drawn conclusions supported the findings of other researchers in the literature review who assert that individual characteristics and cumulative interactions during matriculation influence students' ability to cope and thereby affect persistence in higher education.

The incoming freshmen interview protocol was designed to examine how incoming freshmen viewed themselves and what motivated them to choose CSU. In their responses, the majority of the incoming freshmen reported grade point averages above 3.0 during high school and participation in academic, athletic or social organization in high schools. The level of academic and social interactions prior to entering college substantiate why the majority of the incoming freshmen indicated they were prepared to manage the academic rigor as well as non-academic aspects of adjusting to college, or would seek assistance to cope with adjusting to college. Researchers found that the initial level of college preparation students have upon entry was a factor that influenced their success (Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Crisp and Delgado, 2014; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). In addition to high grade point averages, the incoming freshmen reported having confidence in their ability to adjust to college. According to Conley (2008), self-awareness is a component of college readiness. The findings also align with researchers who found that successful matriculation depended also on non-cognitive skills such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, the ability to manage stress and coping techniques. (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Rigali-Olier & Kurpius, 2013).

Correspondingly, the graduating seniors participating in the study adequately dealt with challenges or sought assistance from campus personnel. The responses from graduating senior which indicated the influence of a CSU faculty or staff member on their decision to persist bolster bore out the significance of personal interacations. In the study, the researcher concluded that academic and social benefits occurred when CSU students developed relationships with faculty. Researchers found that specific initiatives as well as welcoming behaviors of campus personnel to aid students in coping (DeAngelo, 2014; Kalsbeek, 2013a; Lightweis, 2014; Swecker, Fifolt & Searby 2013; Tinto, 1993) and out-of-class academic support improved the academic success of students (Ellertson &Thoennes, 2007; Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Shaw and Matter, 2013) . O'Keeffe (2013) asserted that relationships between students and even one key figure within the university affected whether a student remained enrolled. Additionally, O'Keefe contended it was not sufficient for an institution to admit students and expect students to adapt without support. The researchers' findings and conclusions were congruent with the importance of positive relationships between students and campus personnel.

The researcher found that connectedness to CSU was the result of involvement with campus organizations and concluded that along with student interactions with campus personnel, a climate of acceptance positively affected persistence. O'Keefe (2013) linked attrition to the failure of institutions to build "positive relationships" and foster a "sense of belonging" for students (pp. 609-612). Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon (2016) found students identifying or expressing themselves in an alternate way sought "college counseling services, and reported significantly higher amounts of depressive symptoms, social anxiety, and eating concerns than their heterosexual peers" and increased likelihood for suicide attempts p. 201). In the study, incoming freshmen surveyed reported that acceptance of their race, religious choices, LGBT

expression or disability influenced their decision to attend CSU. Congruently, graduating seniors reported praised the Student Life personnel for activities celebrating diversity, tolerance and acceptance. The responses of the graduating seniors supported were similar to the findings in the literature review that linked identity formation and moral identity decision making, commitments, and intrinsic motivation (Hardy, Francis, Zamboanga, Kim, Anderson & Forthun, 2013; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). Graduating seniors in the study reported an unwillingness to leave CSU for fear of being unable to find another university as tolerant of their identity. Thus, the researcher concluded the that a tolerant environment is a significant factor regarding persistence.

The researcher's concluded that the incoming freshmen who did not report a specific reason for choosing CSU were likely to withdraw based on the responses of graduating seniors whose parents chose CSU for them. The conclusion supports DeAngelo (2014) who contended that developers of first-year experiences should intervene with students who were not engaging with other students as they were among the group likely to withdraw from college. Proactive interventions benefitted students who are hesitant to ask for assistance or think that asking for help is evidence they cannot complete college (Castro, 2013, Conley, 2008; Lightweis, 2014; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). The conclusion also aligned with Hoover's (2015) study of successful collaborations among faculty, staff, and coaches. The researcher's conclusion that accountability for persistence should be shared across the campus resulted from the responses of graduating seniors who reported that academic and social integration balanced negative experiences.

The researcher also concluded that leadership should consider a strategic institutional approach with unified goals. Researchers stressed the imporannce of understanding institution-

specific dynamics (Flores & Park, 2013; Miller & Bell, 2016; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013; Seelman, 2014; Wolff, Himes, Soares & Miller, 2016). Additionally, Hellreigel & Slocum, Jr., 2011 asserted that the long-term success of an organization relied on the relationships among members as well as stakeholders; the processes used to achieve goals; the ability to respond to change; and the management of resources. The researcher conclusion adapted the Hellreigel & Slocum's views on organizational success to institutions of higher education.

Implications

The results of the study confirmed the researcher's choice for a conceptual framework as an effective research framework for other researchers interested in studying persistence and retention. The researcher sought to provide quantitative and qualitative data to understand why 30 percent of CSU students persist and shed some light on why 70 percent of CSU students do not persist. The researcher's use of modified snowball sampling resulted in a study that included a diverse cross-section of the modern college student population. The researcher's sample included diversity across race, age, gender, sexual orientation, pre-college academic and social experiences, financial need as well as health challenges and disability. The diversity of the sample boosted the researcher's belief in the generalizability of the study which only studied CSU incoming freshmen and graduating seniors.

Specifically, the study confirmed the appropriateness of Kalsbeek's (2013a, 2013b) suggestion for higher education leaders to use and institutional approach to retention. Without shared accountability across Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and administrative offices, incoming freshmen can be swept up in the euphoria of the marketing, but later suffer from what they deem to be insurmountable challenges from faculty, staff, or the processes of matriculation.

The graduating seniors in the study shared details of negative experiences at CSU which could detrimentally affect the persistence of incoming freshmen, especially some of those who indicated weak commitments to CSU, weak commitment to obtaining their degree, or listed academic resources and student support resources as important factors for choosing CSU. It is vital that enrollment mangers at institutions of higher education study their own students and survey them regularly.

Before beginning study, the researcher reviewed a 2005 report written by a CSU task force on retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) rates. Many studies, including the 2005 CSU report track at-risk students and first-year students, but there is reason for each institution to examine sophomores, juniors and seniors. From the researcher's study, the graduating seniors experienced challenges to persistence at different points of their matriculation. A concentration only on first-year students can lead to lack of support for sophomores, juniors, and seniors. However, an institutional approach to supporting students through graduation can reduce the problem. A significant issue in higher education is recruiting students well, but losing students to transactional experiences in the classroom or through the business processes of college. With the demands on higher education to serve an increasing diverse population, the researcher's study supports the institutional approach to persistence and retention in order to ensure that all campus employees create and maintain a culture conducive of students feeling valued by the institution.

Like the baby boomers, millennials have grown accustomed to industry tailoring products and services. While the traditional educational framework is instructor-centered, modern students expect higher education to be student-centered. They also expect more of a straight line between the classroom and career application. Modern students have been educated in the No Child Left Behind era which often meant instructors taught and harped on concepts that would

appear on standardized state tests in fear of having an undesirable number of students fail the test and subject the entire school to punishment and ridicule. These students from the No Child Left Behind era have had less physical education. They have had fewer music and art courses. They seldom had the luxury to take a class or learn something for enjoyment. When they are in college, the modern student scarcely relates to professors who grew up in a time when teachers had more academic freedom in K-12, and when scholarship not percentiles on state standardized tests ruled the classroom. When the modern student and certain professors meet, it can result in a clash of cultures. Although there should be some give-and-take by either side, the research bears out that instructors, students, and institutions wins when the instructor proactively engages with students. Similarly, staff who are tasked with carrying out the business of the college with students must recognize their role in persistence and retention. College is the environment in which some young people have their first encounters with completing applications, reading contracts, paying bills, and meeting crucial deadlines affecting their future. Care must be taken in the tone of voice and facial expressions used when delivering information as well as the verbal and non-verbal communication the student offers. Sometimes, students do not understand or they are emotional and they are not absorbing what is being said to them.

A vital implication of the study is the implementation of persistence/retention strategic planning which stipulates that everyone working or volunteering on behalf of the institution has a part to play regarding persistence and retention. The wrong way of thinking is hoping to avoid "these kinds of students." While some faculty and staff may want to say: that's why college is not for everyone? The recent trend is that college should be accessible to everyone. Now, that these students are here, they must be taught and served as if their success is intermingled with the goals of campus personnel. Kalsbeek (2013b) emphasized the importance of ensuring students

experience the university they were promised when they were recruited. Tinto (2012) suggested

adding retention-oriented tasks for faculty such as relevant course assessment and frequent

feedback so students will know whether they are not doing well in time enough to improve their

grades.

It is easier to study reasons why students chose to persist than it is to locate students who

have left an institution and ask them why they withdrew. According to Kalsbeek (2013a),

educators typically focus initiatives and programs on students identified as highly likely to

struggle or withdraw, but Kalsbeek maintains that educators should implement an institutional

approach targeting overall retention and thereby absorb those who historically struggle to persist

to degree completion, as well as those who are at risk and were not identified and leave the

institution before graduating.

Recommendations

The researcher set out to contribute to the persistence and retention scholarship and more

pointedly provide information to CSU leadership, faculty and staff that may benefit efforts to

reach and retain students. The researcher presented conclusions which are the foundations for the

following recommendations.

For Leadership

The study serves as a research-based, updated and relevant examination of the factors

which influenced the persistence of students preparing to graduate December 2017. The

researcher's recommendation for CSU leadership is to strengthen persistence/retention efforts

with a strategic plan empowering and expecting campus personnel as well as students serving in

leadership or influential positions to help students achieve success each semester and graduate

from Columbus State University. The researcher's study verified that student involvement,

faculty rapport, and positive or negative experiences with faculty, staff, or processes influenced

the persistence of CSU students. Therefore, the researcher recommends a cohesive set of initiatives for anyone working or volunteering on behalf of CSU. The initiatives should delineate the expectations of creating and maintaining a welcoming environment in classrooms and offices, respect in speech and written feedback to students in regard to assignments or administrative transactions, and inclusion of a persistence/retention tag line on syllabi and other campus documents or signage. The goal would be improving the six-year graduation rate and institutional stability.

Academic Affairs (Faculty)

Academic performance is central to remaining enrolled. Obviously, a student who fails out cannot return. However, some students feel overwhelmed by the course assignments or time management challenges. Friendly and accessible faculty can reduce anxiety and improve performance. In addition, by reviewing classes with high failure rates especially for freshmen and sophomores, dean and chairs may discover a need to redesign curriculum, hire additional tutors, rotate classes among faculty or other strategies to ensure students are receiving the best opportunity for success in their courses.

Student Affairs (Staff)

Recruiters, orientation staff, enrollment managers and other staff members who interact with potential students and current students should emphasize the importance of developing rapport with campus personnel, making friends participating in student organizations or attending campus activities. On campus marketing efforts, should intense promote to current students the value of attaching to the CSU. The benefits from the study included persistence but also academic and social benefits, positive emotions and the ability to mitigate negative experiences.

CSU's closeness to home the reason an overwhelming majority of freshmen students chose CSU and a reason why several graduating seniors persisted. The particular fact should not be considered inconsequential and taken for granted. Marketing in Muscogee County and nearby counties could be even more intense and specific, touting to residents that CSU recognizes and appreciates that local residents choose CSU. In addition, because CSU has been the choice of local residents, the success of local residents should be tracked. Data from tracking the progress of local residents through matriculation should serve as additional fuel for recruitment and marketing. The bandwagon marketing encourages other local residents to choose CSU and persist.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future studies of CSU may include researching the graduation rate for students who commute to CSU, the percentage of students who are actively involved in campus organizations, the persistence and graduation rates among students involved in campus organizations or participating in campus-sponsored academic opportunities, the persistence among students who only take classes, the persistence of minorities, the persistence of students receiving financial aid, and the pass rate of classes taught by part-time instructors.

The six-year graduation rate at Columbus State University has remained at 30% since 2005 (CSU Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2017). The researcher asserts that the answers to why 70% of students do not persist can be found by further examining when students withdraw. The year, month and term at which students tend to withdraw from the institution could provide a rational for targeted initiatives. By reviewing the persistence between sophomore year and junior year, enrollment managers can find out whether there needs to be a focus on second year students. In addition, by reviewing the persistence between junior year and

senior year, academic advisors may find out that third year students may benefit from an activity that evaluates congruency with declared major. The student may realize that the frustration is not with CSU or faculty member, but the major is not the right fit.

Of note, the researcher is very interested in the persistence and graduation rate of students who are from Columbus, Georgia, persistence and graduation rate of students who live at home with their parents, and the persistence and graduation rate of students whose parents told them they had to attend CSU. An overwhelming majority of students in the researcher's study chose CSU because it was close to home. Some students live on campus home is more than hour drive. Some are from Columbus, but are living on their won or own campus. However, some are living with their parents. There were incoming freshmen in the study and graduating seniors who indicated that they were "forced" to attend CSU. The researcher is interested in whether there may be a justification for initiatives targeting students who did not get to go "off" for college and are disappointed. The researcher is curious to whether those types of students take longer to graduate, graduate in four years or less, transfer or withdraw.

After more than 80 years of persistence and retention studies conducted by hundreds of researchers, there has yet to be one solution for attrition because students persist based on their characteristics and their cumulative encounters. The researcher posits that through regular studies and varying guiding research questions, enrollment managers will become more knowledgeable of the factors influencing the student population at their institution and can intervene appropriately to retain students.

Dissemination

The researcher has completed an original study to contribute to higher education and improve persistence and retention rates. The researcher plans to submit the study for publishing in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. The researcher intends to propose a section of the dissertation for publishing on higher education websites such as *Inside Higher Ed*, *Higher Ed Job*s, and *Chronicle Vitae*. Additionally, the researcher intends to begin her journey into conducting more research, writing and submitting articles for publishing, and traveling across the country for speaking engagements. If given the opportunity to present on campus, the researcher welcomes the opportunity to present the findings to CSU President Dr. Chris Markwood and the Staff of the Office of the Provost & the Vice President for Academic Affairs.

Concluding Thoughts

The study confirmed that a college degree is still considered valuable, and not overpriced for the effort it takes to obtain. The graudating seniors persisted because each semester they were unwilling to embark on a path without their degree.

I sought a doctorate because I believe in proving the importance of education. With my doctorate, I do not intend to be sedentary, but instead demonstrate with action that I consider myself bound to the success of students and the field of education. This doctoral journey has taken 47 months. I have learned more about persistence, about higher education, about people, about processes, and about myself – my strength, my resilience, and my pride. Although there were external forces threatening to hault my advancement toward my doctorate, there were never any internal forces urging me to quit. I, like many of the undergraduates in the study, was intrinsically motivated, buffeted by faculty, and committed to completing my degree. If I had it to do all over again, I would do it almost exactly the same way. I look forward to "Chapter 6."

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APPENDIX A

Quantitative Questionnaire for Freshmen

1. Your age as a freshman at CSU.
   - (a. 18
   - (b. 19
   - (c. 19
   - (d. 20 or over

2. Race
   - (a. African-American
   - (b. Caucasian
   - (c. Hispanic
   - (d. Asian
   - (e. Biracial
   - (f. Other

3. High School Grade Point Average
   - (a. 3.5 to 4.0
   - (b. 3.0 to 3.4
   - (c. 2.0 to 2.9

4. Activities in High School (can select more than one)
   - (a. participated in sports
   - (b. participated in at least one student organization for three years or more
   - (c. held an office or led an athletic team or organization
   - (d. did not participate in extra-curricular activities

5. Do you have to work part time or use financial aid to afford to attend CSU?
   - (a. financial aid
   - (b. work
   - (c. both
   - (d. neither

6. Are you first person in your immediate family to attend college?
   - (a. Yes
   - (b. No

7. Would you say that will be able to "bounce back" from any challenges to feeling comfortable at CSU based on your identity (race, gender, gender expression, disability, or academic weakness)
   - (a. My pre-college experiences have prepared me for challenges without support.

    (b. I can bounce back but I will need to talk to someone on campus.

    (c. I can bounce back but I need to talk to someone back home.

    (d. I would consider transferring to another institution due to challenges.

8. To what extent, did closeness to your hometown influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

9. CSU has a student faculty ratio 18:1. To what extent, did accessibility to faculty influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

10. To what extent, did on-campus housing influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

11. Being socially involved in campus life is important to some students. To what extent did the variety of CSU student organizations influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

12. To what extent did tolerance of someone's religious preference, agnosticism, atheism influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

13. To what extent did tolerance of someone's LGBT expression influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

14. To what extent did academic resources at CSU such as the library, tutoring, writing lab, math lab, etc. influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

15. To what extent did the availability of student support services at CSU such as counseling, disability services, health services and international student services influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

16. To what extent did customer service/friendliness of CSU faculty, staff or students influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

17. To what extent did a focus on first year students (ROAR, first year experience couses, student success courses) influence your decision to attend CSU?
    (a. Very much b. Much. c. Somewhat d. It did not play a role)

18. What would you say your commitment is to your degree?
    (a. Very strong b. Strong. c. Somewhat d. Not strong.)

19. What would you say your commitment is to remaining at CSU until you graduate?
    (a. Very strong b. Strong. c. Somewhat strong. d. Not Strong)

20. What was your overall reason for choosing CSU? (free-response)

APPENDIX B

Qualitative Interview Protocol for Freshmen

1. Based on your orientation at ROAR, do you feel CSU demonstrates a commitment to the "identity" of the student body in terms of programs, counselors, or organizations in respect to race, gender, culture, disability services, religious diversity, LGBTQ expression or international student services?

2. Adapting to college and adjusting to new environment away from family is difficult for some students. How much of a role did closeness to your hometown play in your decision to attend CSU based on your initial feeling of being able to cope with academic and social challenges?

3. Based on your orientation at ROAR, registration, admissions process, do you feel CSU demonstrates a commitment to providing "good customer service to you" as far as respecting your time, academic goals, and emotional feelings in terms of accessibility of faculty and staff; timely feedback to questions; helpfulness and friendliness?

4. CSU'S mission statement is: "We empower people to contribute to the advancement of our local and global communities through and emphasis on excellence in teaching and research, life-long learning, cultural enrichment, public-private partnerships, and service to others."

   Based on the recruitment activities, marketing, orientation at ROAR, registration, admissions process, how has CSU demonstrated a commitment to the mission statement as it related to you, such that it makes you excited about earing your degree from CSU?

5. What was your overall reason for choosing at CSU?

APPENDIX C

Qualitative Interview Protocol for Graduating Seniors

1. To what extent did CSU demonstrate a commitment to your identity in terms of programs, counselors, or organizations in respect to race, gender, culture, disability services, religious diversity, LGBTQ expression or international student services?

2. How often did you have to find support from a peer or from family because you felt a lack of commitment from CSU?

3. To what extent did CSU demonstrate a commitment providing "good customer service" to you as far as respecting your time, academic goals, and feelings in terms of accessibility of faculty and staff; timely feedback to questions; helpfulness and friendliness?

4. CSU'S mission statement is: "We empower people to contribute to the advancement of our local and global communities through and emphasis on excellence in teaching and research, life-long learning, cultural enrichment, public-private partnerships, and service to others."

    To what extent did CSU demonstrate a commitment (promise) to the mission statement as it related to you, such that it made you want to persist and earn your degree from CSU?

5. What was your overall reason for persisting at CSU?

6. How much stress would you say you experienced directly attributed to CSU?

7. How much thought did you give withdrawing for CSU without completing your degree because of something that happened at CSU?

APPENDIX D

Approval from CSU Institutional Review Board

Institutional Review Board

Columbus State University

Date: 7/20/17

Protocol Number: 17-101

Protocol Title: An Examination of Factors Influencing Persistence at Columbus State University

Principal Investigator: Varonika Hardman

Co-Principal Investigator: Wendi Jenkins

Dear Varonika Hardman:

Representatives of the Columbus State University Institutional Review Board have reviewed your research proposal identified above. It has been determined that the research project poses minimal risk to subjects and qualifies for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110.

Approval is granted for one (1) year from the date of this letter for approximately 130 subjects. Please note any changes to the protocol must be submitted in writing to the IRB before implementing the change(s). Any adverse events, unexpected problems, and/or incidents that involve risks to participants and/or others must be reported to the Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu or (706) 507-8634.

You must submit a Final Report Form to the IRB once the project is completed or within 12 months from the date of this letter. If the study extends beyond 1 year, you must submit a Project Continuation Form to the IRB. Both forms are located on the CSU IRB website (https://aa.columbusstate.edu/research/irb/). The completed form should be submitted to irb@columbusstate.edu. Please note that either the Principal Investigator or Co-Principal Investigator can complete and submit this form to the IRB. Failure to submit this required form could delay the approval process for future IRB applications.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact the IRB.

Sincerely,

Amber Dees, IRB Coordinator
Institutional Review Board
Columbus State University