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# First-Year Student Perceptions of a Community College Success Course: A Phenomenological Approach

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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# First-Year Student Perceptions of a Community College Success Course: A Phenomenological Approach

(Title)

By

**Aaron J Walk**

## THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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**First-Year Student Perceptions of a Community College Success Course: A**

**Phenomenological Approach**

**Aaron J. Walk**

**Eastern Illinois University**

## ABSTRACT

The use of college success courses by community colleges in recent years has had a significant impact on the academic success of their first-year students. Although studies have shown increases in grade point averages and retention rates for students enrolled in success courses, few have examined student perspectives of these courses. The intention of this study was to gain an understanding of the student perceptions of college success courses and how they shaped their college experiences. By using a phenomenological method of inquiry, the researcher interviewed six community college students enrolled in a college success course. The participants were students of first-year status of which three were on academic probation and three were in good academic standing. Results showed that participants perceived the course to be instrumental in improving their self-image, abilities to forge relationships, academic competence and student engagement. Participants discussed the impact college success courses had on the development of their sense of belonging and academic aptitude and how these factors helped shape their college transition.

*Keywords:* college success courses, first-year students, community colleges, transition

## DEDICATION

This thesis, along with my graduate school experience, has been a battle of persistence. There were several times throughout the course of my studies where I had doubts as to whether or not graduate school was the right decision. I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wife Emily. Not only did you make the suggestion that I return to school, you were there to help me see there was light at the end of the tunnel. Your unwavering love and support helped me immensely during this process and I would like to say both thank you and I love you. Finally, I would like to thank my grandparents. Although you are all gone, I reflected frequently upon all of your unconditional support and past words of encouragement and kindness that reminded me that good things happen for those who work hard. I know you are all smiling down at me from somewhere.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Due to the necessity of a college degree in order for many individuals to be competitive in the job market, more students are pursuing postsecondary education (Juszkiewicz, 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 20.5 million students attended college in the United States, an increase of 5.2 million students from 2000. One area of higher education that has experienced sharp increases in enrollment during recent years has been the community college. Enrollment at community colleges increased drastically from just 5,000 in 1960 to 7.3 million in 2010 (Cohen & Brawer, 2008 & Shapiro, Dunbar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014). According to a recent study (Ma & Baum, 2016), 42% of all college undergraduates and 25% of all full-time college students were enrolled in community colleges in 2014. This study (Ma & Baum, 2016) further indicated that 46% of all college students who earned a degree from a four-year institution during the 2013-2014 school year had at some point, been enrolled at a community college.

In 2010 President Barack Obama projected that by 2020, the U.S. will have the highest proportion of college students in the world and that community colleges will produce 5 million additional graduates (The White House, 2015). The following year, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) announced the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative designed to continue the accessibility of community colleges, prepare students for the transition into higher education, and to ensure students gain the knowledge and skills necessary to complete their degrees (AACC, 2012). Despite these objectives and

the prediction made by President Obama, the completion rates of community college students remain a concern.

Although institutions have implemented and improved practices and programs to increase completion such as mandatory student orientation, academic advising, mandatory enrollments in developmental courses and college success courses, retention rates among community college students have decreased (Morest, 2013). According to Bers and Schuetz (2014), between 40 and 50% of freshmen enrolled in community colleges leave school before their second year of attendance. In addition, a mere 30% of first-year students enrolled in two-year institutions complete their degrees within six years and nearly 25% of those students who enroll in the fall do not return the following semester (Shapiro, et al., 2015). Community colleges must improve these numbers in order to meet the objectives set forth by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative.

It is important for administrators at two-year institutions to identify the causes of low retention rates and have programs in place designed to guide students down the path towards graduation. There are various reasons why a large proportion of community college students do not finish their degrees. Improvements in the economy in the years following the “Great Recession” have led to the creation of new jobs and are attracting individuals who would otherwise complete college (Juszkiewicz, 2016). Other factors include transitional difficulties during the first semester and the lack of academic skills necessary to get through college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Horton, 2015, & Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Institutions cannot effectively deter students from an improving job market. They can however, implement specific strategies and programs designed to address the challenges and needs of students entering college. One type of

strategy used by community colleges has been college success courses (Bers & Younger, 2014).

Until recently, community colleges have received little attention for their student success courses (Bers & Younger, 2014). These courses are growing in both number and size and are being used in higher education to improve student retention and academic success (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Although college success courses are broad, they offer a number of services and curriculums designed to address the academic and transitional needs of community college students. Curriculums range from the development of study skills and test-taking strategies to learning about money and time management. In addition, these courses emphasize the purpose and use of academic and campus services to aid students' transitions during their first year and to help increase their overall readiness for academic success (Gardner & Barefoot, 2012).

Research in recent years has indicated a positive relationship between college success courses and academic perseverance among community college students. Although these studies have addressed the significance of success courses and their impact on increasing student retention and grade point averages, little emphasis has been placed on the student perspective of these courses. In other words, it is important to gain an understanding of how students view the design of the success course and how the course impacts their ability to succeed in college. According O'Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009), students found success courses to be helpful in learning about the college environment and study skills to help with their classes. Duggan and Williams (2011), indicated that students valued the importance of topics and teaching methods in their evaluation of college success courses. Through student perspectives, institutions can

better understand how to enhance college success courses in order to help students overcome the barriers to academic success (O’Gara, et al., 2009).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of first-year students enrolled in a college success course at a community college located in the Midwest and how these perspectives shape their experience in the class. Findings from this study can be useful to help college success course professionals at the institution to assess the effectiveness of their college success courses and to provide further insight in how to improve the overall experience for their students. Since the individual experiences and outcomes of students may differ, it is important to develop these courses to fit students’ particular academic needs. By going beyond the focus of remedial development practiced by many traditional success courses, community colleges can use these courses to focus on other factors of student success such as academic satisfaction and motivation and how they can lead to improved self-efficacy and retention.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are first-year students’ perceptions of enrolling in a college success course?
2. What aspects of the course are beneficial for students?
3. What course environmental factors impacted students’ progress throughout the course?
4. How did the course impact student engagement and academic competence?



## **Significance of the Study**

Community colleges have been experiencing increased enrollments in recent years in response to economic demands that emphasize the need for postsecondary education and training. Consequently, two-year institutions find themselves enrolling greater numbers of students who would not have attended college in the past (Jamelske, 2008). Many of these students however, are entering college lacking the skills necessary for them to succeed at the postsecondary level. As a result, they are confronted by a number of challenges as they enter their first semester of college. Such things as being responsible or attending classes and completing assignments without the immediate support from their family or peer groups are new to many students and they quickly find themselves unprepared for the rigors of higher education. Therefore, many of these students face a high risk of dropping out as they attempt the transition to college (Clark & Cundiff, 2011).

Some students leave college prematurely for personal reasons while others depart as a result of academic failure (Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Regardless, it is crucial for two-year institutions to implement specific strategies and programs designed to assist students to develop the skills necessary for the successful transition to college and to increase the chances of retention for their academically at-risk populations. Recent studies have indicated that the first year of college is critical for developing a foundation for academic success and the benefits of college success courses designed to assist students make successful college transitions has been recognized (Ben-Avie, Kennedy, Unson, Jinhong, Riccardi, & Mungo, 2012). Understanding how college success courses help to prepare students for college can be instrumental in helping college success course professionals

measure students' level of academic success and satisfaction. By examining a particular population of community college students, professionals can better understand how success courses can help students be more successful.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study was that it examined first-year students enrolled in college success courses at a single institution. Consequently, this study is not representative of the entire population of first-year community college students in the country. Another limitation was the students selected for the study held varying attitudes towards college success courses and therefore, reduced the likelihood that all students will have similar perceptions. Furthermore, there was a risk of losing participants that could result in further misrepresentations (Charu, Vasquez, Bottoms, Matthews, Hudson, & Whitley, 2015). A fourth limitation of this study was related to location and time constraints. With this, attempts were made by the researcher to adequately schedule interviews with participants at and near the research site during a suitable time when participants were not overwhelmed by the interview process. Finally, the researcher has a past record of teaching college success courses and the study was subject to a slight degree of researcher bias.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Academically at-risk student.** A student or group of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school (Horton, 2016).

**College success course.** A course for designed to assist students in developing the skills and understandings necessary for the transition to college (Charu, et al., 2015).



**College transition.** A student's potential to achieve academic success and to adjust to the individual and interpersonal challenges presented by college life (Barefoot, B., Gardner, J., Cutright, M., & Morris, L. (2005).

**Community college.** Any two-year institution regionally accredited to award students the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2005).

**First-year student.** A community college student who has completed thirty semester hours or less.

**Retention.** The ability of an institution to retain its students from the time of their admission to the completion of their degree (Seidman, 2005).

## **Summary**

Due to the challenges faced by academically at-risk students during their transition to higher education, community colleges need to implement strategies to identify this population of students and to assist students towards degree completion. College success courses are one of those strategies. Chapter one discussed that the first year of college is a critical stage for the development of foundational skills necessary for students in order to achieve academic success. The remainder of this study addresses the significance of college success courses, their effectiveness in improving student persistence and retention, and how students who enroll in these courses benefit academically. In addition, this study added to the existing literature on success courses and programs for college success course professionals to use when developing college success course curriculum.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

This section explores the existing research on the topic of college success courses in higher education. In addition to college success courses, the researcher reviewed literature pertaining to at-risk college students, college transition, the purpose of the community college, student engagement and academic competence, and retention as a way to develop a framework for the current study.

#### **At-risk College Students**

The literature surveyed identified a number of risk factors that could threaten students' abilities to succeed academically and remain in college. First, is the academic preparedness among students entering college that may affect their ability to succeed in higher education. Recent studies show that the lack of academic preparedness places college students, especially those in their first year, at a higher risk of failing courses and dropping out of college (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Horton, 2016). Horton (2016) studied a number of academically related factors ranging from students' background and individual characteristics to environmental factors having negative impact on academic persistence, whereas Cates and Schaeffle (2011) analyzed the relationship between college preparation programs and student readiness. Both studies suggested that institutions identify the characteristics of at-risk students upon entering higher education and have programs in place designed to prepare students for the transition to college from high school and to persist towards degree completion.

Second is the degree of self-belonging students hold upon entering college. According to O'Keeffe (2013), students who experience feelings of rejection have

difficulty adjusting to college life and can be at risk of dropping out. This study identified a number of key groups of students who were considered at risk for non-completion. These groups were comprised of ethnic minorities, part-time students working full-time jobs, students with family responsibilities, students with disabilities, students of low socioeconomic status, and students on academic probation. While developing a sense of belonging is critical to the retention of at-risk students, “doing so can be elusive for many students” (p. 607).

A third factor cited in the literature are the levels of academic performance among college students. In one study that examined the relationship between performance and attrition risk, students who both underperformed and overperformed were at risk of not completing their degrees. According to Shaw and Mattern (2013), students who performed below their predicted first-year grade point average (FYGPA) were shown to be at risk of dropping out or being placed on academic probation. At the same time, students who performed well above their FYGPA were shown to be at risk of dropping out or failing courses due to non-attendance. This, according to the study, resulted from courses that were too easy and thereby left students “bored, questioning the purpose of college, and subsequently resulted in early departure of the institution” (p. 254).

The fourth factor are institutional characteristics and how colleges themselves may be accountable for at-risk students. One study argued that the financial policies and practices of colleges and universities may have significant effects on dropout behavior. According to Chen (2012), students who attended institutions with higher levels of expenditures on student services had lower risks associated with academic failure and dropping out than those who attended institutions with low expenditures. Horton (2015)

also addressed the relationship between the availability of student services and at-risk behavior. Although she did not analyze financial resources, Horton revealed that the existence of student support services provided an important environmental factor in student attrition. Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, and Cantwell (2011) studied the effects of faculty and staff behavior on at-risk retention. According to their study, there was a positive relationship between the retention of at-risk students and the overall personality of faculty and staff. The findings revealed that faculty and staff who displayed a desire to connect with students, openly sought to make a difference in student's lives, and held genuine and authentic personalities played an integral role in at-risk retention.

The final factor are the personalities of at-risk students and how they contribute to low GPAs and high dropout rates. According to Laskey and Hetzel (2011), the personality profiles of at-risk students were indicators of whether or not they would succeed academically and be retained by the institution. In their study, Laskey and Hetzel (2011) identified five personality characteristics that could hinder the scholarly performance of at-risk students: neuroticism, openness, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientious and tested the probability that each type would use academic services. The results revealed a positive relationship between the personality traits of agreeableness, openness, and conscientious and the use of academic services that would in turn improve academic performance. Neuroticism on the other hand, showed a negative relationship as it was revealed that students with high scores of this personality type did better academically due to the fear of failure. Finally, students who reported high extraversion scores were less likely to be retained due to their focus on socializing as opposed to academics.

## **Transitioning to College**

According to Upcraft, et al. (2005), the largest proportion of students who prematurely leave college do so during the first year. The reasons why students leave school prematurely varied but in general, most of them were related to situations beyond an institution's control (Cohen & Brawer, 2005). One factor were the transitional difficulties experienced by students during their first year in college. According to Feldman, Davidson, Ben-Naim, Maza, and Margalit (2016), the first semester in college is critical for students who are transitioning and thereby crucial for their overall success. Stewart, Lim, and Kim (2015) argued that students who did not resolve transitional issues during the first year increased their likelihood of dropping out. While it is important to understand the consequences that may occur for students experiencing transitional difficulties, it is essential to understand the causes of these problems.

Sutton, Muller, and Langenkamp (2013) studied the timing of a high school transfer and its effect on college transition. According to this study, a transfer during the summer months disrupts the four-year high school career and a transfer during midyear interrupts both the four-year high school career and the structure of the school year. The study revealed that high school students who transferred midyear were less likely to attend college compared with those who transferred during the summer or not at all. Furthermore, students who transferred during the summer were less likely to attend a highly selective college compared to those who did not transfer. Overall, this study found that students who did experience an unscheduled transfer in high school and did attend college, experienced greater transitional difficulties than their non-transfer counterparts.



Feldman, et al. (2016) studied the relationship between hope and loneliness among students with learning disabilities (LD) and how it affected their transition during the first month of college. According to this study, students with LD who reported higher levels of loneliness also reported lower levels of hope and academic self-efficacy (ASE). This study also revealed that students with LD who participated in college transitional programs while in high school demonstrated higher levels of hope in college than those LD students who participated to a lesser degree or not at all. What remains important, however, is that services are available for LD students with low ASE levels to ensure them the opportunity for a successful transition during their first year.

Zhang and Smith (2011) studied the effects of race and the transition from high school to college. This study analyzed the transition experiences of Black students and how they differed from the experiences of White students. In doing so, the researchers explored the effects of parental support and the helpfulness of parents, friends, high school teachers and guidance counselors, college professors and academic advisors, college orientation programs, and first-year seminar. Overall, this study revealed that Black students relied more on guidance counselors in high school and orientation programs in college than did White students. In addition, Black students held significantly lower grade point averages than White students. In short, this study did not reveal whether or not race was a significant factor in a successful transition from high school to college. It does however, provide us with an assumption that since Black students rely more on counselors and orientation programs and experience lower GPAs than their White counterparts, they could appear a greater risk to experience transitional difficulties.

Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) studied the effects of first-generational student status and social-class achievement gap on college transition. According to this study, students whose parents do not have four-year degrees typically earn lower grades and experience greater difficulties achieving academic success than students who have at least one parent with a four-year degree. This study showed that first-generation students were less likely to pursue college resources and therefore, experience greater transitional difficulties and lower grades than non-first-generation students. The study also revealed that by eliminating the social-class achievement gap, first-generation students sought out more and utilized college resources, improved their grade point averages, and experienced improved transitions.

Guassi-Moreia and Telzer (2015) studied how changes in family cohesion across the transition between high school and college could be related to changes in depressive symptoms. According to the researchers, “the college transition is a time during which adolescents are vulnerable to depression” (p.78). This study revealed that adolescents who reported an increase in family cohesion also reported a lesser degree of depressive symptoms during their transition from high school to college. Overall this study highlighted the significance of family, in particular parents, and how it plays into whether or not students will have a successful transition from high school to college.

### **Purpose of the Community College**

The community college is a unique feature in American higher education that can be traced back to 1901 with the establishment of Joliet Junior College. Since then, the overall function of these institutions has been broad ranging from preparing students for academic transfer to four-year universities to offering career-ready and technical

programs, and providing continuing and developmental education and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2005). The missions of community colleges are broad and are often tailored by each individual institution to suit the needs of the individuals that it serves. Although broad and unique, these missions are designed around one critical component: the student. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2017), the overall mission of the community college is to provide education for individuals and students in its service area. Within this mission is a basic commitment to serve students through an open-access admissions policy that offers comprehensive educational programs with a commitment to teaching, lifelong learning, and community service (AACC, 2017).

The main difference between community colleges and universities lies largely with the former's emphasis on open access and the student. Current literature on the mission of the community college sheds significant light on the significance of student access to higher education as well as student success. According to Leeder (2013), "the open access mission of community colleges commonly translates into student success through the creation of services that address and recognize common challenges faced by students that represent the demographics of the community" (p. 195). Although productivity, accountability, and institutional effectiveness have been important features in college mission statements during the past two decades, there has been an even greater focus on access and student success in community colleges in recent years (McClenney, 2013).

Morest (2013) studied the effects of open access and how it contributed to the evolving social role of community colleges and the resulting challenges faced by



institutions as a result. According to this study, nontraditional students make up the majority of students enrolled in community colleges largely due to their affordability and nonselective admission policies. These policies have made it possible for low-income and working students to attend college. As a result, community colleges are often the first choice for a high-risk population of students ranging from racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation students, and academically unprepared students (Morest, 2013).

According to Morest (2013), “a general concern exists regarding the low completion rates of students given the critical role community colleges are expected to play in providing access to higher education” (p. 324). Although open access, low tuition rates, and relaxed application and withdrawal procedures can be seen as contributing to a climate that experiences high non-completion rates, Morest (2013) argued that the majority of students succeeded in this type of setting. Much of this, according to the study, had to do with the effort put forth by faculty and staff to ensure that students felt a continuance of support and encouragement. Overall, while this study acknowledged the challenges created by the open access mission of the community college, it suggests a unique relationship between the student and the institution that sees the student attempt college while the institution serves as a guide through the curriculum.

Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) provided a sociological approach to understanding why community colleges emphasize access as a primary feature of their overall missions. According to this study, “increased access grants postsecondary opportunities to undeserving students who exhibit low rates of completion and transfer to four-year institutions” (p. 27). This study sought to analyze the problematic relationship

between the community college's mission to increase educational opportunity and its failure to improve college completion rates among students of key demographics. By doing so, the researchers used an approach focused on social stratification that viewed community colleges as institutions that extend opportunity to students who are traditionally disadvantaged and to assist them in improving their social mobility.

According to Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015), open access and low costs allow community colleges to reduce inequality in postsecondary educational opportunity by increasing access to higher education. As a result, these institutions are able to attract students who under normal circumstances would not be afforded the opportunity to pursue college and thus, are given "second-chance access to higher education" (p. 31). Furthermore, admitting this population of students has important implications for their outcomes. According to this study, students who were less likely to attend college benefited more from degree accomplishment than their peers.

While open access to community colleges has increased access to higher education, Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) argued that access to more selective institutions is unequal. According to the researchers, "students are categorized into tiers of higher education that have become increasingly segmented in terms of fields of study, degrees conferred, and returns to credentials" (p. 31). In other words, institutions that are highly accessible provide the least social benefits while those that are more selective, provide greater social opportunities. Overall, this study shed light on the positive and negative consequences of the community college's mission in regards to access. Although students benefit from the open access mission they are in the end, at a

disadvantage when forced to compete against individuals who have completed bachelor degrees.

### **Student Engagement and Academic Competence**

According to a report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012), two-year institutions have become increasingly aware of the need to increase the persistence rates of their students. As a result, a number high-impact educational practices designed to help students plan, initiate, and sustain success have been used by community colleges in recent years in order to increase student engagement and degree completion (CCCSE, 2012). These practices range from mandatory orientation and early registration to college success courses and first-year experience seminars to increasing classroom attendance and students' utilization of campus services (CCCSE, 2012).

Although this report provides community colleges with the tools necessary to increase student engagement and competence, they must still identify how student factors fit into the framework. Krumreri-Mancuso, Newton, Kim and Wilcox (2013) studied a number of factors that determined whether or not college students were achieving their academic goals. In this study, Krumreri-Mancuso, et al. (2013) examined how academic self-efficacy, organization and attention to study, stress and time management, involvement with college activity, emotional satisfaction with academics, and class communication helped improve student success. Student success, according to the study, was determined by an increase in participants' end of the year grade-point averages. The results of the study concluded that with the exception of class communication, the variables were relevant to the outcome measure of student success.

Pruett and Absher (2015) studied the factors that influenced the retention of developmental students in community colleges. In this study, the researchers examined ten variables that determined the impact of the retention of developmental education students: academic engagement, the type and number of developmental and remedial courses, time spent in class preparation and college-sponsored activities, frequency of the use of academic services, planning services, and peer tutoring services, grade point average, and parents' educational level. The results of the study indicated that the variables all had a measurable impact on the persistence of developmental students. Furthermore, Pruett and Absher (2015) indicated that the two most significant variables were GPA and the extent of academic engagement. With this, the results showed that students who persist in college as questions in class, contribute to class discussions, and work with fellow student on projects during and outside of class.

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) studied the relationship between student behaviors and the institutional practices and conditions that factor into student success. In doing so, Kuh, et al. (2008) examined the links between student engagement and academic achievement and persistence. With this, they sought to understand whether or not student engagement during the first year of college had a positive impact in first-year GPA and persistence into the second year. The results of the study revealed the following: first, student engagement in educationally purposeful activities was positively related to academic outcomes as shown by first-year GPA and persistence rates. Second, student engagement revealed a positive effect on first-year GPA's and persistence into the second year at the same institution.

Saenz, Hatch, Bukoski, Kim, Lee, and Valdez (2011) examined the similarities and differences in student engagement levels in community colleges. According to Saenz, et al. (2011), “student engagement has important implications for student outcomes, particularly its positive influence on student learning” (p. 239). This study analyzed four variables that helped measure student engagement: racial and gender identity development, nontraditional status, institutional characteristics, and the role of student services. The results of the study indicated high levels of student engagement among students who are well-prepared academically, regardless of variable type. This study did reveal higher levels of student engagement among females and that peer collaboration resulted in higher engagement levels among nontraditional students. Finally, the study revealed a positive and direct relationship between the use of student services and increased levels of student engagement. Overall, this study reveals that institutions can increase student engagement levels by encouraging students to seek out and utilize student support services (Saenz, et al., 2011).

### **College Success Courses**

Ever since the first college success course was created at John Hopkins University in 1877, colleges and universities have offered courses designed specifically to assist students in their college transition. These courses are typically categorized into extended orientation, discipline-linked, academic, or basic study skills seminars or ones that combine elements from all of these categories (Upcraft, et al., 2005). The purpose of these courses is to help build students’ knowledge and skills that are essential for college success (Ben-Avie, et al., 2012; Bers & Younger, 2014). Research has indicated that



students who enrolled in these courses experienced easier transitions, earned higher grade point averages, and were retained by their institution (Shapiro, et al., 2014).

Jamelske (2008) studied the impact of college success courses on grade point average and student retention after one year. College success courses were defined as courses ranging from highly organized learning communities to basic courses designed to introduce students to college life. Retention was defined as students who continued into their second year of college. The purpose of this study was to research whether or not college success programs had a direct relationship between students' GPA and retention rates. Results of the study showed that there was no statistically significant positive effect from being enrolled in a college success course on student GPA and retention. Overall, while it did not find a positive relationship between college success courses and retention, this study is significant because it provided a path for researchers to expand research on college success courses to determine the positive outcomes they may have.

Ben-Avie, et al. (2012) studied the effects of a college success program initiated by a medium sized university located in the Northeast designed to promote student engagement, improve academic competencies, and increase retention rates. This study revealed that students who participated in the program earned higher grade point averages, higher rates of retention, and more college credits than students who did not participate. Furthermore, this study identified what the researchers called a "psychological-educational factor" (p. 144) that explained the difference in the transitional outcomes between participants and nonparticipants. Overall, students who enrolled in the college success program experienced increased levels of academic achievement and retention rates.

Studies indicate that first year community college students face a variety of obstacles standing in the way of degree completion and are more likely to require a developmental course than students entering four-year institutions (Cho & Karp, 2013; Crisp & Taggart, 2013). Cho and Karp (2013) studied the effects of a college success course at a large community college system in the Southeast. In this study, the researchers examined whether or not enrollment in a college success course played a role in students earning more credits and persisting into the second year. Crisp and Taggart (2013) studied the relationship between required and optional college success courses at various community colleges and whether or not a cause and effect relationship existed with student outcomes. Although there was no evidence linking a cause and effect relationship between success courses and student outcomes, both studies revealed a significant link between success courses and increased credits and persistence.

Clark and Cundiff (2011) studied the impact of a first-year college experience course in relation to students' first-year grade point averages and retention rates. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a first-year experience course and the degree to which propensity score adjustments reduce research bias that affect the treatment effects of first-year college programs. The researchers hypothesized that students who take first year experience courses will be different from those who do not in that they will have higher grade point averages and higher second-year retention rates. Although, the results of this study failed in finding a positive relationship between college success courses and higher grade point averages and retention rates, student traits may have been significant factor of academic success.

The majority of literature surveyed for this proposed research has been from quantitative studies seeking to uncover relationships between student outcomes and college success courses. Most of those studies showed a positive relationship between the courses and student success while others revealed mixed results. Although the previous literature can be useful for institutions by increasing their knowledge of foundational courses designed for college success, it does not take into consideration the student experience. Clark and Cundiff's study (2011) recommended that further research emphasize how student traits factor into the effectiveness of college success courses. While that focus can be useful for researchers and practitioners alike, it is not enough to bridge the gap between outcomes and experiences.

There is a body of qualitative research that builds upon student experiences from taking college success courses. O'Gara, et al. (2009) analyzed college success courses in the community college through the perception of the students enrolled in them. In this study, the researchers observed the institutional and personal factors that contributed to and stalled student persistence in the community college. The findings of this study revealed that students who enrolled in the course benefited from it in a number of ways. First, they were able to obtain important information such as course scheduling, graduation requirements, and available student service programs on campus. Second, students enrolled in the course reported that it was useful in helping them develop important academic skills such as time management and study skills. Finally, the study revealed that many students found the course useful in that it helped them forge relationships with their fellow students and faculty. Overall, this study found significant



first-hand evidence of the effectiveness of these courses and how they are useful in retaining students.

Duggan and Williams (2011) studied community college success courses from the student perspective. In this study, the researchers sought to understand what topics students found most useful, what teaching methods students found most helpful, and how success courses could be customized to better serve the students. According to the study, students reported study skills and information provided in these classes to be useful. However, the usefulness of specific topics varied according to the preparation of each student prior to entering college. Overall, the researchers argue for the creation of specialized programs and courses to “fit the needs of the diverse community college population” (p. 121).

### **Retention**

Literature on the issue of student retention focuses on a number of issues associated with the phenomenon. According to Seidman (2005), retention issues in higher education have increased with growing student populations and increased diversity within those populations. Furthermore, Seidman (2005) pointed out the changes in student abilities, preparation, and individual characteristics that in recent years have shaped the reasons why students attend college and how they impact the chances they will be retained. Upcraft, et al. (2005) pointed out various motivational factors among students that ranged from them questioning why they are in college to feelings that college is not as challenging as they expected. According to Cohen & Brawer (2005), retention can be enhanced if actions are taken to integrate these students with the college.

In one study (Claybrooks & Taylor, 2016), five variables determined low persistence rates among first-year students: lack of campus diversity, dissatisfaction with campus social life, lack of emotional and academic preparation for college, and a lack of satisfaction with college experiences. The researchers argued it crucial that colleges not only identify these variables, but identify those students who are at high-risk of dropping out in order to provide necessary support required to maintain their enrollments. Furthermore, it is necessary for institutions to identify the variables and characteristics that determine persistence.

Martin, Galentino, and Townshend (2014) studied the role of motivation and self-empowerment and their relationship with the retention of community college students. The purpose of this research was to determine the common characteristics and behaviors of a population of students who persist in a community college. In their findings, Martin, et al. (2014) revealed that that successful graduates had clear goals, strong motivational levels, the ability to manage external demands, and self-empowerment. Overall, the study found that the typical predictors of low college persistence, cultural capital, and academic unpreparedness can be overcome by community college students by managing external demands, having clear goals, self-empowerment, and motivation. Furthermore, the study showed that the students who lacked cultural capital or academic preparedness compensated with self-direction, motivation, and the development of new systems.

Barnett (2011) researched the effects of faculty validation on community college student persistence. According to this study, the majority of these students' college experiences were in the classroom. Therefore, the level of faculty endorsement of students played a significant role as to whether or not students were retained by the

institution. The purpose of this study was to analyze student interactions with faculty in the community college with focus on the way that validating interactions influenced students' persistence decisions. The findings of this study revealed that faculty who took the initiative to know and care about their students, provided caring instruction, appreciated diversity in the classroom, and provided mentorship had a profound positive influence on student retention.

The majority of literature on student persistence focuses on the first year of college. As a result, student dropout rates during the later years of college are often left disregarded in the body of research on the topic of retention. Bers and Schuetz (2014) studied the phenomenon involving the premature departure from college by community college students who were in their second year. According to the researchers, most institutions implement practices designed to improve student success during the first year thus, "assuming early intervention will improve retention and long-term success" (p. 169). Therefore, the causes related to second year retention issues have become difficult to identify. This study revealed a number of factors leading to second-year retention problems ranging from work commitments and full-time employment opportunities without an earned degree, loss of student aid due to accumulating credit hours beyond the number required for the degree, and transferring to a four-year institution without earning an associate's degree. Overall, this study provides evidence that retention issues are not merely a problem in the first year. Therefore, Bers and Schuetz (2011) argued that the traditional focus on first-year student retention must be extended to include all students regardless of their progress.

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Student developmental theory can explain a number of significant factors leading to transitional difficulties and high dropout rates of at-risk college students. The theories that best describe these two phenomena for at-risk college students are Nancy Schlossberg's (2010) theory of transition and Vincent Tinto's (1987) student departure theory (1987). These two theories can be significant in helping us to understand why students experience difficulties in their transition from high school to college and why students feel compelled to leave college prior to the completion of their degrees.

Schlossberg's transitional theory identifies what transitions are and examines the varying forms of transitions, the transitional process, and factors that influence transitions. According to Evans, Foney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) there are four major factors, known as the "4 S's" that influence a student's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. In examining a student's situation, Schlossberg's theory considers the trigger and the timing of the transition, the degree to which a student can control the transition, and whether or not the transition involves a role change. In addition, the duration of the transition, previous experience with a similar transition, concurrent stressors, and an assessment of who or what is responsible for the transition and how a student's behavior is impacted (Evans, et al., 2010).

In examining a student's self, Schlossberg's theory looks at how one views him or herself and classifies those factors into two categories: the personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources (Evans, et al., 2010). According to Evans, et al. (2010), personal and demographic characteristics are described as "affecting how an individual views life" (p. 217). Included are factors such as socioeconomic status,

gender, age, stage of life, state of health, ethnicity, and culture. Psychological resources, according to Evans, et al. (2010), includes such factors as coping aids, ego development, optimism and self-efficacy, values and commitment, and resiliency and spirituality.

According to Evans, et al. (2010), support refers to social support and involves four main types: intimate relationships, family units, friend networks, and institutions and communities. It is suggested by the authors that social support can be measured by “identifying the individual’s stable supports, supports that are to some degree role dependent, and supports that are likely to change” (p. 217). The final factor, strategies, looks at the descriptions of coping responses and how they modify the situation, control the meaning of the problem, and aid in managing stress. In addition, individuals may employ “four coping modes: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior” (p. 217).

Tinto’s (1987) theory argues that individual departure from institutions is part of a “longitudinal process of interactions between an individual and members of the academic and social systems of the institution” (p. 113). In other words, if students’ individual experiences are marked by positive and integrative experiences between them and the institution, they will enjoy heightened levels of intentions and commitment to complete college. On the other hand, if students’ experiences are negative or non-integrative, they will have weakened intentions and commitments and will therefore, be more inclined to drop out.

According to Tinto’s model of institutional departure (1987), students enter college with a range of demographic backgrounds, personal attributes, skills, values, and precollege educational experiences and achievements. Furthermore, this model argues



that experiences in college, mainly those arising out of interactions between the student and other members of the college, are directly related to the student's persistence at the institution. Overall, this model contends with the belief that "interactive experiences that advance a student's transition will increase the likelihood that the student will persist at the college until the completion of the degree" (p. 115).

### **Summary**

The existing literature identifies the academic challenges faced by first-year community college students and how they can benefit from enrolling in college success courses. Community college students differ from those enrolled at four-year institutions by academic preparedness, transitional abilities, and understandings of college purpose which according to the literature, could have a negative impact on their academic competencies that hinder their ability to complete their degrees. Therefore, college success course professionals can benefit from this knowledge by including curriculum in their courses designed to improve student engagement and academic competence with the goal of helping students persist into the second year and ultimately complete their degrees.

## CHAPTER III

### Methods

#### Design of the Study

This study examined first-year community college students enrolled in a college success course, their experiences in this course, and how they defined themselves in this course. A phenomenological study was conducted in order to access and understand first-hand experiences and to identify commonalities among different individual perceptions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). Individual interviews were conducted with students enrolled in the course and class sessions were also attended in order to observe how students interacted in the class. To identify and access the target population, the researcher communicated with the college strategies coordinator and appropriate instructors to give them information about the study. The researcher utilized purposive sampling and requested that the staff pass along information on to both the first-year and at-risk students in their courses and to forward the names and contact information of students who may be interested in participating. Students who expressed interest were interviewed at and near the research site by the researcher.

As a means to ensure the validity of this study, the following strategies described by Joseph Maxwell (as cited in Yin, 2011) were used. Respondent validation, which means to receive feedback from the participants, was used to limit any misrepresentation of their views and behaviors (Yin, 2011). Transcribed interviews were sent to participants via email so they could verify what was said during the interview. Two participants responded. Finally, triangulation, the collecting of joining evidence from different sources, was used to strengthen the validity of the study and to reduce bias (Yin,

2011). This was done by combining participant interviews with observations on how the participants interact with their class.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were six, first-year students enrolled in Success Strategies (SS) 101 during the spring 2017 semester and were identified by the researcher with assistance from the SS 101 coordinator and the course instructors at the research site. Volunteers for the study were contacted by the researcher via email (Appendix C). Participants were provided with an informed consent form (see Appendix D) stating the purpose and design of the study and that their participation is voluntary and could be discontinued at any time.

**Participant 1.** Participant 1 was a 50-year old, Caucasian male who resided off campus in a small, rural town in the Midwest. Participant 1 was a freshman at the institution in good academic standing where he majored in Information Technology (IT). He was required to enroll in SS 101 as a stipulation of his participation in a “work and learn” program at the institution.

**Participant 2.** Participant 2 was an 18-year old female who identified herself as Hispanic. She resided off campus in a small, rural town in the Midwest. Participant 2 was a freshman at the institution with an undeclared major and was on academic probation. She was required to enroll in SS 101 as a condition of her probation.

**Participant 3.** Participant 3 was a 25-year old, Caucasian male who resided off campus in a small, rural town in the Midwest. Participant 1 was a freshman at the institution in good academic standing where he had an undeclared major. He enrolled in SS 101 voluntarily, taking the course as an elective.



**Participant 4.** Participant 4 was a 26-year old, Caucasian female who resided off campus in a small, rural town in the Midwest. Participant 4 was a freshman at the institution on academic probation majoring in Psychology. She was required to enroll in SS 101 as a condition of her probation.

**Participant 5.** Participant 5 was a 19-year old, Caucasian female who resided off campus in a small, rural town in the Midwest. Participant 5 was a freshman at the institution on academic probation seeking her Basic Nursing Assistant (BNA) certificate. She was required to enroll in SS 101 as a condition of her probation.

**Participant 6.** Participant 6 was a 30-year old, Caucasian male who resided off campus in a small, rural town in the Midwest. Participant 6 was a freshman at the institution in good academic standing and was majoring in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). He was required to enroll in SS 101 as a stipulation of his participant in a “work and learn” program at the institution.

### **Research Site**

The research site was a midsized two-year public institution located in the Midwest in a rural community with a population of 18,555 residents. The community, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016) is predominantly White (96%). The site enrolled 6,351 students of which the majority (85%) were White (U.S. News & World Report, 2017). The site is located near a Division I university and is within a three-hour drive from three major metropolitan areas.

### **Instruments**

The research consisted of semi-structured interviews for the purpose of gaining information on the students’ perceptions of SS 101. The interview protocol was six first-

year students who were enrolled in SS 101. Participants responded to questions asking them about their perceptions about enrolling in a college success course, what it meant to be enrolled in the class, what aspects of the course were beneficial, and how have they changed as a result of taking the course. Interviews were conducted at and near the research site near the end of the spring 2017 semester and during the summer 2017 semester.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, it is important to take into consideration how the researcher's background and experience may have affected the interpretation of the data. As both a one-time academically at-risk community college student with past retention problems and a college success course professional, the researcher conducted this study to gain increased understanding of how students enrolled in college success courses perceive certain aspects of the courses and themselves throughout the course. By examining student perceptions of college success courses, this study may assist administrators at the research site with further development of their college success programs.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected during class observations and via separate, semi-structured interviews with participants that were conducted near the end of the spring 2017 semester and during the summer 2017 semester at and near the research site. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants one through five in order to gain further data from their experiences. An interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed to help guide the interviews. In addition, an observation protocol (see Appendix B) was used to gain an understanding of how students interacted in their classroom environment. Interviews

consisted of open-ended questions that served as a guide to help the researcher collect data (Yin, 2011). Furthermore, this protocol assisted the researcher and the participants engage in conversation as opposed to having a structured question and answer session (Yin, 2011). Interviews were recorded and transcribed within three weeks of completion. Data was analyzed and coded into categories regarding participants' perceptions regarding SS 101. Participants' responses to the questions were used for content analysis. This technique is valuable in analyzing and observing the interview data and will allow the researcher to indirectly analyze the subjects' attitudes towards SS 101 (Fraenkel, et al., 2015).

### **Treatment of the Data**

Qualitative data obtained through interviews was done so using recordings, transcriptions, and coded data from the interviews. Prior to the questionnaires and interviews, participants were required to read and sign an informed consent form agreeing to participate in the research. Participants' identities and contact information will remain confidential and will be protected by the researcher and maintained in a secure file. Interview data was kept in a secure file and was only accessed by the researcher and thesis advisor. Observation notes were kept in a private journal made accessible only to the researcher and thesis advisor. All data and audio recordings will be deleted three years after the study in accordance with IRB regulations.

### **Data Analysis**

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and the transcriptions were used for data analysis. This was followed by coding the transcriptions according to Yin's (2011) guidelines for coding qualitative data. Open

coding was used at the beginning to specifically describe each piece of data. Afterwards, these codes were grouped into categories via axial coding which is the process of grouping codes into categories. Once categorized, the data were reassembled in a hierarchical arrangement in order for the researcher to identify themes that described the participants' perceptions of the college success courses. Observation notes were coded in the same manner as the interviews in order to identify themes and patterns that are present during the researcher's observations.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of students enrolled in a college success course. Through interviews and observations, the researcher hoped to gain an understanding of how first-year community college students make meaning of college success courses and how they make meaning of themselves while enrolled in the course. By using two separate methods of data collection, the researcher increased the level of validity drawn from the conclusions of the data.

## Chapter IV

### Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of first-year community college students enrolled in a college success course and how those perspectives shaped their experience in the class. Six individual interviews, lasting from 30 to 120 minutes, were conducted by the researcher. From these interviews, the researcher identified a number of themes which were grouped into three overarching categories: self-image, building relationships, and developing competence. These themes were used by the researcher to answer the study's guiding research questions.

#### **Self-image**

During the interviews, participants were asked what they thought about being enrolled in a college success course and what benefits existed as a result. In particular, they were asked why they enrolled, what it meant for them to be enrolled, their feelings towards the course, and what benefits there were to being enrolled in the course. As a result, numerous themes surfaced to help answer the study's guiding research question. The following section sheds light into research questions 1 and 2:

1. What are first-year students' perceptions of enrolling in a college success course?
2. What aspects of the course are beneficial for students?

**Pathway towards self-improvement.** When asked about their initial thoughts towards enrolling in SS 101, four of the participants viewed their enrollment in the course as a route towards self-improvement. Participants 1 and 3 both shared that they viewed the course as an opportunity for them at the beginning of the semester. According to Participant 1, "I was actually looking forward to the idea that I might be able to straighten

out a few things [poor study skills]”. I was never really good at taking notes and developing good study habits can come in handy”. In addition, he further stated that “basic study skills were something that I never had and unfortunately, came out of high school with a “C” average as a result. This class [SS 101] really helped me learn how to take notes and learn different studying strategies”.

When asked to describe his initial feelings towards the course, Participant 3 stated that:

I thought that the syllabus had a lot of good information for resources that I could use in the future. This is my first college experience so I want to get as much helpful information as possible early on, so that if I decide to transfer to a four-year school I will have the tools necessary to do so.

Participants 2 and 4 also viewed the course as a means to improve themselves as a student. However, their experiences differed in that they expressed feelings of self-doubt and disappointment in their initial perceptions of enrolling in the course as they were required to enroll as a result of them being placed on academic probation. When asked how she felt about being on academic probation, Participant 2 said that “it did make me feel a little disappointed in myself because I know that I can do better and it also helped me realize that I do need to improve in certain traits [study and time management skills] that I lack in”. Nevertheless, when asked to describe her initial thoughts towards the course, Participant 2 said that “well, I thought it was going to be a class where students go in like it’s a detention and you have to repeat all of the work and lessons that they’ve already learned”.



Similarly, Participant 4 was required to enroll in the course as a result of being on academic probation. She said that being on probation “made me feel like a total failure and was probably one of the worse things that I ever did. Yet at the same time, it also made me work harder and feel a little more grown up”. When asked how she felt about enrolling in SS 101, she said “I was okay with it, but I did kind of feel like I didn’t need the class and was just like, whatever will get me through school”. In addition to her indifferent attitude towards the course, she, like Participant 2, did have reservations towards the course and that it felt at first, like “I was being punished”. However, at the same time she said “it also made me realize that it wasn’t punishment and that this was the stuff that I need to know to help me succeed in life”.

**Developing a sense of purpose.** When asked what it meant to be enrolled in the class, most participants revealed that it helped them to develop a purpose in their lives which in turn, sheds light on how they made meaning of the course. Participant 1 said that he had attended college earlier but dropped out midway through his first semester after the passing of his child. He described the period that follows as a time where “I kind of took a nose-dive for a while and that my son’s passing caused me to lose my reason for existence”. It was during this period that he realized that his downward spiral into depression and alcohol use was threatening his ability to be a role model to his other son and after coming to this realization, decided to “refine” himself [make changes]. When asked what meaning the strategies course had to him, he said “it gave me guidance and helped me become a better student and with those, it will help me to be a better father to my son”.

Participant 4 revealed a similar dilemma and while discussing her meaning of the course said that “it made me realize that I would have to work for it in order to make it through [school] and that I guess it’s all about being more successful in both school and life”. When asked how she defined success for herself, she said “for me personally, it would be for my daughter to see me accomplish my goals and to help her think that all of her dreams and goals are possible”. Although she expressed continued indifference towards the course, she did state that it was a means to an end. For example, when asked if there was anything in particular she was taught in the course to help her establish her purpose, she said “no, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that there was a particular topic that helped me realize my goal, it was more just pushing myself to get through and to show my daughter that it can be done”.

Participant 3 and 6 shared similar revelations when asked what it meant to them to be enrolled in the course. According to Participant 3, “it’s [the course] just part of my life plan”. This statement had to do with his setting of personal goals that so far, include him furthering his education in order to have greater career opportunities in the future. With this, he said “I am making a massive effort towards personal benefit by taking this course and while I take as much continuing education as I can, this [the course] is going to really help me in the long-term. Participant 6 said that he too, has used the course as a means to satisfy his career goals. When asked if the course ever helped to establish a sense of purpose, he said not at first but that it eventually made him realize his goal of becoming a teacher:

I do enjoy teaching. I was a trainer in a factory and I enjoy teaching people things. My instructor and I have always kind of thrown around the idea that if I

ever went back to school that I was going to go back to be a teacher. It [SS 101] gives me more of an understanding about how to ask questions about the education major and what it looks like going down that path.

**Developing a sense of belonging.** Throughout the interviews, a common theme emerged from five of the participants on how age impacted their sense of belonging on campus. Participants 1 and 6 both discussed in great detail the age gap between themselves and the other students in the course. Participant 1 explained that he was apprehensive about returning to school due to him being thirty years older than the average college student. According to him, “I had a lot of trepidation coming back to school. When I started taking classes again, I realized that I was old enough to be most of these other kids’ father”. Participant 6 held a similar attitude during his discussion of what it felt like to be a thirty-year-old freshman. He said “I fit in better than I thought I would. At first, I was expecting the younger students to distance themselves from me”. When asked to elaborate why he felt this way, he said:

When my fiancée was in college working on her master’s degree, I would be on campus with her and notice that a lot of the younger students didn’t want to be around the older students. They had their own group and the older students stuck together among themselves too. That’s sort of what I was expecting. I was seeing myself on an island by myself.

Participants 3 and 4 discussed the age gap in among the students in the class, but appeared comfortable or unaffected by being older than the majority of the others.

According to Participant 3, when asked what else he enjoyed about the course, he said:

It is interesting the range of people who were taking this course. I will admit to

being a little worried that I was going to be in a class with a bunch of eighteen-year-olds. Even though I'm only twenty-five, I have been in the workforce since high school and my experiences make me feel much older, or should I say more mature. Because we [class demographics] go all the way from eighteen to forty and everything in between, it is more comfortable.

When asked if she felt a difference between herself and the traditional aged students,

Participant 4 said:

I was a little stressed at first because I'm twenty-six and am just now going to school and didn't know what to expect from other students. There were a couple of students who were older than me but to be honest, nobody in the class seemed to care [that they were older]. Personality-wise, everyone was great.

Participant 2 had a unique take on her age and how her attitudes were shaped by being one of the younger students in her class. When asked to discuss her experiences from the time she started college to the time of our interview, she stated that she felt she was too young to have been in college since she was only seventeen. With this, she revealed that she felt a struggle due to her being on the line between adolescence and adulthood. She said "I guess I've felt a bit more adult-like because eighteen is the legal age to be an adult. But at the same time, I'm still a teenager so I feel like I am caught between two worlds and I don't always feel like I belong here". These sentiments were echoed later on in our interview when she stated that she had what she described as a "limited sense of belonging on campus". When asked to discuss what she meant by "limited involvement", she said "I feel like I belong because it [SS 101] was very welcoming. But aside from that, I felt like I was the odd one out because I was so young.

I felt content, but also out of place”. The idea of age as a factor influencing one’s sense of belonging will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 5.

**Development of self-worth.** Five of the participants discussed several times throughout their interviews a need to feel validated or to regain a lost sense of value. Participants 1 and 4 touched on a number of issues they both had going into the course and how by the end of the semester, had regained a sense of self-value. Participant 1 held a low level of confidence that added to his reservations about returning to school. This caused him to develop a fear of failure mostly because he felt he lacked confidence as to whether or not he had the ability to succeed academically. When asked how enrolling in SS 101 helped him overcome this fear he said:

It seemed like a safer class to take especially since I had previously taken part of it online. So, the learning curve was really low for me because of my past experience with the course and that established a comfort zone for me to experience being in the class, connecting with the other students, and to get into the habit of showing up to class on time with a piece of paper and a pen. It doesn’t sound like it should be a hard thing to do, but for some of us it really is. So, you could say, that I really learned how to go to school.

His description of the course as being “safer” was interpreted as SS 101 being a simple course which in turn, allowed him to ease back into school after a layoff. In addition, it granted him the opportunity to experience a classroom environment and to connect on a personal level, with other students.

Participant 4 contributed her low self-esteem on an abusive relationship that caused her to question her ability to do well in school. She said, “it created a lot of stress



for me both in the relationship and in school. It caused me to question myself and I didn't think I could do well". Participant 5 described going to college as something she was very eager to do. However, shortly after the beginning of her first semester she admitted to second-guessing herself as to why she was in school. This, according to the participant, was due to difficulties that existed between her and her classmates that made her feel like an outcast. She said "I was originally enrolled in the cosmetology program. I would try to talk to people but no one really talked to me because I was quieter and sometimes didn't connect with anyone in my classes". This perceived inability to connect with others via a personal level in turn, led to decreased self-esteem that led to her not finishing the program.

Participants 2 and 6 discussed their need of validation, both from themselves and others, as having an impact on their self-worth. Participant 2 was unsure as to whether or not she was responsible enough to be in college. This, based on her uncertainty about her major and doubt as to whether she was mature enough to be in college caused her to self-reflect in order to gain an understanding on what she needed to do make herself believe she was ready for college. She said:

I'm just now taking my first steps out in to the real world instead of being sheltered like when I was a child. So, I guess that I'm building up an idea of what responsibility is. I did have that feeling when I was in high school but then, I felt like I had second chances and in the real world you don't.

Participant 6 said that he felt like he had not lived up to his full potential. During the interview, he often questioned his value because he was not at the same level in life as



others in his age group. For example, he believed that he should have already earned his bachelor's degree and that he should be on the same level as two of his close friends:

I feel like I should have at least a bachelor's degree and I've definitely blew that making the decisions that I've made and the circumstances that have happened in the past. Just seeing some of my friends and the things they do [one is a veterinarian and the other is an administrator for a fraternity chapter]. I know that I'm capable of more. Seeing my friends being successful and knowing and stuff and knowing what they were like in high school and how I was in high school. I'm not saying that I was a slacker by any means, but I know that some of the people from high school who are way more successful than me were complete slackers. So, it kind of hurts me to look at that and see this guy has an awesome career and is doing well in life and I'm kind of like, back to square one.

### **Building Relationships**

Participants were asked questions about their interactions and relationships with their fellow students and instructors. In addition, they responded to questions asking them about their instructor's teaching style and how it benefited them in their courses. Furthermore, participants were asked questions regarding their relationship with the institution as a whole as a result of taking the strategies course. This section provides insight into research questions 3 and 4.

3. What course environmental factors impacted students' progress throughout the course?
4. What impact does this course have on student engagement and academic competence?

**Connecting with other students.** One of the questions asked participants to discuss their interactions with the other students in the strategies course and to further elaborate as to whether or not they were different from the interactions with students in their other courses. The majority of the participants described their interactions among their fellow students in the strategies course as different from students in their other courses. For example, Participant 3 said, “by far, the students in SS 101 are a lot more engaged than the other in-person classes that I’ve had. Admittedly, those [other classes] have been math courses though and I think that engagement is pretty much up to the professor on that one. Overall, he described interactions in SS 101 as good and said “there’s a really good rapport between everyone and seems like they all want to be there”.

This sentiment was echoed by the other participants who all described their interactions with their fellow students in SS 101 to be different than the ones with students in their other classes. Participant 1 said that the interactions with his classmates in SS 101 was more social than those with students in his information technology (IT) classes. He said, “we’ve done several activities together that were designed to help us get to know each other. A lot of those group activities did help us loosen up and get comfortable with each other”. Participant 4, said she felt a greater level of communication between her and the students in SS 101 than those in her other courses:

I would communicate some to the students in my other classes, but it would be more like small talk, like asking about due dates or what we are going over in class. In strategies, we got to know more about each other and I felt like I could talk more openly with the students there than I could in my other classes.

Participant 5 described a similar scenario between the interactions in between herself and her classmates in SS 101 and those in her nursing classes:

In my other classes, those for my nursing program that I'm in, we do interact with each other like how we're going to take care of our residents and since we did clinicals and everything and learned how to take vitals and all of that. But other than that, we didn't really talk a whole lot. In my billing and coding class, we didn't talk at all. We really just take notes and learn a lesson so, it's not really interactive. In strategies, I got to talk more one-on-one with the people I was paired with. It was nice because I like being able to talk on an individual level with people and I think that of all the courses that I took this semester, it has helped me open up more with people.

These quotes point towards the participants having greater interactions with their fellow SS 101 students. Participant 2 however, felt more of a connection with students in her other classes. According to her, she only felt a connection with one student who she was in another class with and thus, was comfortable interacting with him. Aside from that one student, she discussed that she generally kept her distance from the other students in the class. When asked to elaborate further, she said:

As a child, I was bullied occasionally so I am a little leery about talking to other people. I don't mean to be, but I take the attitude of not talking to strangers very seriously and I worry about certain things. The only time I guess it's different is if it's a smaller class because it feels a lot closer-knit I guess. It also depends on if I know anybody in the class. Also, when it comes to knowing your classmates, it

does make me feel a lot better and more secure because I know that there's someone I can go to and not feel like a complete stranger.

This was noticed during my observations that saw her sitting closely to one student away from the majority of the class that consisted of 25 students.

Participant 6 had a unique take on his interactions with his fellow students, both in and outside of SS 101. For example, when asked to describe his interactions with the students in SS 101 and whether or not they were different from student in his other classes he said sometimes yes and sometimes no. For example, he described a time in SS 101 when a group of students were being disruptive in class. Body language during this part of the interview indicated his annoyance with the situation and he said:

Whenever I'm there, in college, and I'm trying to make the most out of my life, I don't want other people being disruptive. I don't want people talking. I don't want people, you know I'm in college and I feel like I'm old enough and so is everybody else and they don't need to be making inappropriate jokes or if a certain word comes up they start to laugh like Beavis and Butthead.

When asked to describe his interactions with students outside of his SS 101 class, he provided those from his geographic information systems (GIS) courses an example. He said, "it's generally like GIS people have the same goals. So, with that, they're more similar and they can relate on many things both within the course and just as a person". Ironically, when asked if having shared goals with his fellow students benefited him in the classroom, he shared that he did not believe so. According to him, it was better for him to be outside of his comfort zone with certain things because it made him work harder to get better adapting:

I mean, you still want to relate to the people in the classroom but it's better to have a varying degree of people rather than one cookie-cutter type. If you're around certain people, like the same people, it kind of feels like you can put your brain on cruise control. But if you can break it up with different types of people, your brain has to constantly adapt. So, you learn a little better I feel.

**Role of the instructor.** The participants had different ways in describing their relationships with their instructors. Yet, they each eluded to having established more of a personal relationship with their SS 101 instructors and a professional one with their other instructors. Participants 1 and 2 characterized their relationship with their SS 101 instructor as being more of a friendship. For example, Participant 1 described his relationship with his SS 101 instructor as more personal due to shared interests. He said, "we're both into acting and have a lot of the same interest with that. Also, I can talk more actively [interpreted as meaning more on an individual level] because she's an actress. My other instructor [his IT instructor] and I, all we ever do is talk about tech stuff".

Participant 2 described her SS 101 instructor as being more of a friend than what she described as a "typical instructor". When asked to elaborate more on what she meant by this description she said:

I see her [SS 101 instructor] as a friend almost. I still see her as an instructor, but I like the fact that she doesn't act like your typical instructor. A typical instructor to me, is someone you know you can approach but you still see them as a Mr. or Mrs. You don't see them as a person you can hi to. But for the most part, I just



kind of see my other teachers as a professor or doctor. You don't get to say their first names.

For the participant, this was significant in that it impacted her sense of belonging in her classes. She elaborated that being able to approach her instructors on a more personal level motivates her to want to attend class more. She said, "It makes me feel like I want to part of the class more. It also makes me feel that I can approach the teacher more. I guess because it's a lot easier to approach people you see as your friends to ask for help".

Participants 3 and 5 described the differences between their SS 101 instructor and other instructors as having more to do with classroom style and management. According to Participant 3, when asked how the relationship with his SS 101 instructor was similar and different from that of his other instructors, he said "it's different I think because of the nature of what the course is and what she does for a living [the instructor is the Director of Student Life at the institution]. Furthermore, he said "she is heavily involved with all aspects of the strategies class and I would say that it makes me definitely prefer her style". When asked to elaborate more on how the instructors style may have impacted is relationship with her, he said:

Her teaching style has benefited me greatly because I was absent for a business trip the first night of class and I was just getting back home that night. The first night of school. She provided me with some items beforehand, before class met, and I had some of the work done before that and then she really helped me catch up the next day when I was there.

Participant 5 also discussed her SS 101 instructor's willingness to accommodate as having an impact on their relationship. She said:



I feel like I've had a really good relationship with her. She's very open and easy to talk to which was great, because I did need help on some things because I missed part of the class. It was really easy to talk to her to get the information from her. It was really nice.

When asked how the instructor's openness to talk with was a benefit, she said "she made herself available. My other teachers have been the opposite where they were more closed off and not easy to talk to". When asked how this differed from her other instructors, she said, "one instructor is very similar, but the other isn't really that open". With this she stated that it was difficult for her to confront her and to ask her questions pertaining to the class. For example, she said "I felt like I couldn't really ask her questions when I needed to. She wasn't bad and was really nice, but I just felt that it was hard asking her questions". Furthermore, she said "I felt that she didn't really explain things the way I needed it be explained and didn't really do much to help to make me understand".

Participants 4 and 6 both shared with me a sense of personal connection with their SS 101 instructor due to what they both described as being a result of the caring nature of the instructor. According to Participant 4, her SS 101 instructor appeared to really care about each student individually. When asked how this made her feel, she said:

It really just kind of relaxed me and made me not worry as much about what I was worried about. I was afraid that if I had to miss class that I was going to flunk out because you could only miss so many classes without a good reason. She's very understanding and that helps with things like when I had to miss class yesterday for a dental appointment and let me know what we had went over.

With regards to her other instructors, she discussed how two made her classes entertaining and engaging.

One of my instructors was hilarious. He made class so much fun because he joked around with students in a way that was fun. I honestly couldn't wait for the next class. My other instructor was very approachable and I felt that I could talk to her about anything and everything whether it be personal or related to school. These qualities, combined with the caring nature of her SS 101 instructor, had increased her desire to attend classes more regularly. She said that while her lapse in attending school and the realization that she had to attend classes in order to pass was enough, but the interactions and classroom styles of her instructors were an added bonus.

Participant 6 depicted his SS 101 instructor as very personable, transparent, and professional, even during times when some students were displaying immature behavior during class. This was observed during a class session in which the instructor calmly approached a few students who were disrupting a fellow student's in-class presentation. This incident was discussed during the interview where the participant revealed that her ability to handle the situation helped to shape his relationship with her:

She definitely related to them somehow and somehow. I don't know how she did it, but she just had a way where she would just talk to them and make them understand. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop on their conversation or anything, but I could hear how she was talking to those students. They definitely changed their attitudes during their conversation with her.

Participant 6 further added that observing this caused him to view her as the type of professional he would someday like to be:

So, I normally kind of evaluate my instructors on a scale from one to ten if I want to be like them. Her personal interactions and being able to relate to the students on personal level and being able to change their attitudes on a one-on-one basis to make them see that they are screwing up and making them see what they can do better. You definitely weigh yourself against that and I think to yourself, am I actually that big of a person to be able to do that?

Similar sentiments were used by the participant when he described his relationship with other instructors. According to him, there were a few instructors who he stated that he could not relate to but he shared no specifics as to the reasons why he felt a disconnect with them. Overall, he expressed that he had good relationships. For example, he said “the instructors here do a good job of making you feel like they actually care about you. They’re all definitely on par with my good experiences”. When asked how this helped shape his overall college experience, he said “it makes you want to be here. Because if you go to school and hate the class and your instructor, it makes it more difficult”.

**Institutional Support.** The participants described whether or not they thought that the institution was more supportive as a result of taking SS 101. Some of the participants agreed that they felt a closer bond to the school as a result of taking the course. Participant 2 felt a degree of institutional support by being enrolled in SS 101. According to her, “they understand that there are certain classes that you want to take, but that you might have a little bit of difficulty with them and this class helps”. Participant 3 too, stated that his relationship with the institution has strengthened as a result of being enrolled in SS 101. He said, “it’s made me want to spend more time on campus. I know

that I'll be here more this summer and I'm hoping to develop some more relationships with some of the offices to try to guide me towards the right direction". Participant 6 stated that encouragement he received from his SS 101 instructor strengthened his sense of support from the institution:

I began talking to her about education stuff because I found out that she was part of the education program on campus. I slowly began talking about it to her and eventually, she started asking me questions about my interests in the field. That makes you feel good, especially when it's something that you are just kind of curious about but whenever they start showing interest in maybe you pursuing and thinking that it's a good idea. I definitely feel that people here care and want to see you grow professionally.

Participant 5 said that her relationship with the institution changed for the better after having increased awareness of campus resources learned from the class:

I feel like it would have helped me before if I knew what resources they had and what they can offer students like financial aid and counseling. I feel during orientation they should explain more about what resources there are. But now, after taking strategies, I actually know more about what resources are here and I am more comfortable being here [the institution] knowing what all I have and what is there for other students.

Participants 1 and 2 felt no change in their relationship with the institution as a result of taking SS 101. Participant 1 said that he had always felt a sense of connect with the institution. When asked if he felt that by taking the course if his relationship with the institution had changed, he said "certainly not to the negative, but I already knew that it

was supportive”. He also said that he had a personal attachment to the institution long before enrolling in the course:

I already have a personal connection here. It’s near my home and I actually went to high school with some of the employees here. The head of the campus police and I are old friends and in acting, I’ve run across several of the instructors as audience members. So, it’s like family here.

This statement was echoed by Participant 4, who like Participant 1 had been previously enrolled at the institution prior to taking SS 101. She said, “when I first came here, I had the same expectations that I have now except that I was in a rough spot at the time. I’ve always felt like they will help you here when you have an issue with something and I can always speak with them and they can help with it”. Overall, the idea of institutional support and whether or not enrollment in SS 101 helps shape student relationships with their campuses can be looked at through the experiences of the students. The idea of institutional support will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

### **Developing Competence**

The researcher asked participants to answer questions pertaining to the development of basic skills obtained from enrolling in SS 101. The participants were also asked to answer questions pertaining to how they used the course to improve their academic proficiencies and their involvement in campus activities in order to gauge the impact SS 101 had on their connection to the campus and academic abilities. This section sheds light on research questions 2 and 4:

2. What aspects of the course are beneficial for students?



4. What impact does this course have on student engagement and academic competence?

**Campus as a resource.** Some of the participants said that they learned more about campus resources and various services in SS 101. Participant 3 credited his SS 101 instructor with raising his awareness of different forms of financial aid:

Yeah, financial assistance was one thing and this was just what I'm really glad I learned about. So, all of my schooling I've just been paying out of pocket and I haven't really applied for any of the grants or anything of that nature. There are scholarships that the school offers or even national ones for people that are in my position. So, I'm glad that she [SS 101 instructor] gave me some information and I'm thinking that probably next spring and next fall that I'll probably have those courses paid for other than out of pocket.

Participant 5 also credited her SS 101 instructor with introducing her to the various campus services that according to her, she did not know existed:

At first, I didn't really know what resources the campus had, so her telling us what resources were open to us, like the counseling center that is there to help students with questions about their courses. I went to the counseling center for academic reasons, but I think that it's good for anyone who just needs to talk. I also learned some about financial aid, which is good because I go to school using the G.I. Bill. I found that very resourceful, especially for those people who need it.

Overall, Participant 5 expressed gratitude towards SS 101 for giving her information about resources available to students on campus. She said "I'm glad that I took the



strategies class because it opened my mind up to a lot more to what was on campus and what was available to us”.

Participant 6 credited a class activity arranged by his SS 101 instructor as giving him increased knowledge of campus services. According to him, he relied more on the institution’s website for information pertaining to financial aid. He said, “it’s hard to find some things, but they make it easy to find information about financial aid”. However, he was unaware of other services and offices that existed on campus until he participated in a class activity:

There was an assignment that was almost like a scavenger hunt and there was a list of I think forty things, like where you can find Band-Aids on campus and where you can go to get aspirin. I didn’t know where the nurse’s office was located until then. That felt pretty good because God forbid if anything bad happened to me around or on campus. It’s nice to know that if you had to go to the nurse that you have the resources to find what you need and where you’re trying to go.

Overall, however, Participant 6 credited the institution’s website as being the most useful resource. Although he was well aware of the website prior to enrolling in SS 101, he did mention that the scavenger hunt activity forced him to further explore the website and to visit the websites of the offices listed on the assignment.

Not all participants gained a further understanding of campus resources as a result of taking SS 101. Participant 4 mentioned the scavenger hunt discussed by Participant 6. However, it had minimal impact on furthering her understanding of campus services. She said, “I think the only places that I didn’t know where they are was the TRiO office and

health services. But, everything else is pretty easy to locate and I already knew where they are". According to Participant 1, "I know they [resources] were mentioned, but it was either that they didn't pertain or I already knew about them. So, I just sort of disregarded the information. Participant 2 stated that she discovered campus resources on her own through the use of the campus HUB system. She said, "HUB helped me more than the class. With the HUB, it's like you can pick out the classes you want, see if a counselor is available, find out your grades, and know what's going on with your financial aid".

The mixed responses between the participants regarding whether or not the course increased their understanding of college resources could be attributed to their course instructor either giving minimal attention to the various campus services during their classes or possibly leaving them out of their curriculum entirely. One interesting piece of information taken from this section of the interviews was the use of campus technologies in the form of the institutional website as discussed by Participant 6 and the HUB mentioned by Participant 2. This shed light on the impact technology has in helping students learn more about services offered on campus.

**Development of basic skills.** Some of the participants said that the course helped them develop better note-taking skills. Participant 1 said that he had come to the realization that note-taking was one of the most important strategies he started to employ. When asked why, he said "for me, I was a strict auditory learner. If I just sit and pay attention to a lecture, I'll do well. But, being able to actually study, which I never did before, is a new experience. After writing down the lectures, I was getting the highest scores in class". Participant 2 said that she learned how to take more organized notes:

Regarding the notes, I feel that I'm more organized because I've found other ways to take them as opposed to taking them word for word. I've learned how to use bullet points to help me better understand what to study. Having something that I can go and look over feels more like it's a review and not just simple note-taking. That works so much better for me.

Participant 5 also stated that the course taught her how to move away from taking notes word for word:

In high school, they [her teachers] told us that we should try to copy every single thing we were given because we are going to end up needing it somewhere down the road whether it's for tests, quizzes, or research papers. In here [SS 101], she [the instructor] explained that you don't need to take everything down and only need to take down key points.

Furthermore, the participant shared that improved note-taking abilities have helped reduce her overall level of anxiety when it comes to taking tests. When asked to discuss this more, she said "I feel like I've always been pretty good with test-taking. But it [note-taking] helps with what to study and how to use cues and what to look for with tests".

With the exception of Participant 1, the participants revealed that the course helped them with their time management skills. Participant 2 said that while she is still working on this skill, she felt that it had improved. She said "one thing that I'm still working on is just figuring out exactly when I should get my homework done. I do feel like I've learned how to use my time better to get work done before I go home because I take the bus [to campus]". Participant 3 believed that time management is a skill that he believed anyone could work on. When asked how the course helped to develop his own

time management skill, he said “I’ll tell you that calendar activity was interesting. It was a time track that we had to fill out to cover our day-to-day activities. It helped me realize that there’s a lot of wasted time during the day”.

Wasted time was also echoed by Participants 6. He discussed that the section of the course covering time management caused him to realize more about what he should not be spending his time on. For example, he said “I found out more about what I waste my time on versus what I should be spending my time doing”. When asked to elaborate on his statement he said that it helped him to refocus his energy away from time-wasting activities, such as playing video games:

I haven’t played a single video game since I’ve been in the class. I didn’t spend a lot of time playing video games to begin with, but whenever you spend an hour on video gaming versus not spending time studying for a class that you’re struggling in or not dedicating another hour studying throughout the week. Video games, watching television, and just sitting around with dead time is a general waste of time. Things like that are a general wasting of time.

Though the opportunity to discuss the idea of changing priorities was missed, the participant’s quotes have been interpreted as through his development of time management skills that his sense of priorities had changed as a result. This brings forth an interesting idea on how the development of basic skills, such as time management, can change a student’s priorities. This idea will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Participants 4 and 5 discussed that the course indirectly helped them to realize that they had poor time management skills and as a result, they took the initiative themselves to improve. Participant 4 shared that time management was not covered in

class. However, she added that not doing so may have been the result of a class cancellation. Nevertheless, she discussed that she had to read a few chapters out of her course textbook and by doing so, came to the realization that her time management skills left a lot to be desired. She said:

After reading those chapters, I realized that I did not manage my time very well. I would often wait until the last minute to do stuff and then find myself rushing to get my assignments done. This caused a lot of stress not knowing if I was going to get them done in time.

Participant 5 said that her instructor used a time management activity in class, but that her own use of a planner helped her create a schedule and therefore, manage her time better. When asked how she remembered things prior to using a planner she said:

Before, I would just write things down when they were due. I wouldn't realize just how quickly those assignments were coming up and I would miss assignments and my teachers wouldn't let me turn in late work. My using a planner, I think helped me realize when I needed to actually get things done and it helped me not to procrastinate like I used to.

These statements made by the participants not only shed light on their development of time management skills, but also them taking the initiative themselves to improve on a critical skill. This sheds light on yet another interesting idea, the effects of strategies classes on the development of students' self-initiatives.

Participants were mixed as to whether or not the course aided them in the development of their problem-solving and stress management skills. Participant 1 said "you might want to consider asking me something else because I don't really have much



of a problem with those”. Participant 3 simply said “I’m good with those” and by his body language, his statement was interpreted as him having confidence with both.

Participants 4 and 5 both discussed how these skills helped them to resolve conflict.

According to Participant 4, she had experienced what she described as a difficult situation with one of her instructors. She said, “at the beginning of the semester, we had just sort of hit a wall with each other and by being able to speak freely with her, it’s helped”.

When asked to elaborate more on how she was able to use these skills to resolve conflict:

It helped me with my approach to her and how to approach her with more of an understanding versus anger. So, I was able to speak to my teacher with a better understanding on where she was coming from and versus where I was coming from and learn how to have a decent conversation in order to settle our differences.

Participant 5 stated that she was able to utilize these skills to help her gain confidence when managing conflict, but when asked if the course helped her she said “I’m going to be honest, I still hate conflict and I don’t like confronting anyone, but I’m trying”.

Participant 6 stated that the development of problem-solving skills was the result of a group project assigned by his SS 101 instructor. He discussed his development of a contingency plan in the event that one of his groupmates did not appear in class for the group’s presentation.

There was a guy who didn’t even show up for class and we were afraid that he was going to show up for the presentation. So, I had a contingency plan in case he did. I literally had a paper printed out for him to go off in case he did. Even



though he never showed up for class the whole time, I didn't think it would be fair to him to say we're moving on without him because he was still part of the group. Overall, this situation, according to the participant, not only helped him to develop his problem-solving skills, but also his leadership skills. With this, he said "I had this main plan that this is what we're going to do if he doesn't show up. So, it really helped me with problem-solving and leadership skills. I definitely had to take the reins on that".

**Extracurricular activities.** Participants were asked to discuss their degree of involvement on campus and if they learned of any activities as a result of being enrolled in the course. Participant 1 shared that he learned about the theatre club from his SS 101 instructor but due to scheduling restraints, was unable to participate. Nevertheless, he shared that he did talk to her about acting. For example, he said "I had asked her for addresses to talent agencies that she knows and she gave them to me. That was a huge thing. It's something that's really hard to find". Although the participant was unable to partake in any of the campus activities involving the theatre club, his interaction with his instructor regarding acting, appears to have increased his engagement with the instructor based on their shared interests.

Participant 4 and Participant 5 both credited the involvement in campus activities as they learned about in SS 101 for helping them feel like they are making a contribution to society. Participant 4 shared that her involvement in two separate clubs on campus make her feel like she was making a difference:

I was part of the LBGQT group on campus and got to learn more about them as people and I have family members who are part of that group. I joined because I wanted to be around to help them understand that not everyone is hateful towards

them. I felt that I could further help anyone who has an issue or to better educate people who have an issue with people who do live their lives like that and to understand that's who they are. I also participated with the environmental club too. It makes me feel good because I am a vegetarian and it makes me feel like I'm helping the Earth in return for living here. When I recycle, it helps me feel good because I know a lot of people don't and it's just a waste and kind of sad that the environment is hurt as a result.

Participant 5 used information given to her by the instructor to locate events hosted by the Student Affairs Board (SAB). One such event was a program designed to help individuals with special needs, in which the participant described her involvement in as having a personal impact on her:

There was this campus program called helping hands that is kind of like Special Olympics and I was a buddy for a day. That was really fun and I went to a couple of the events on campus and thought they were really neat. But I think that honestly and personally, the helping hands program impacted me the most. I loved it because my fiancée's brother has special needs so, on a personal level it made me feel great. It was a great experience overall because it means something to them [individuals with special needs] to actually be able to go and have fun for a day and for helpers, because we actually get to communicate and talk to them and be able to be their friend. I think that it was awesome and great to be able to do something like that.

The quotes made by the participants regarding their participation in these groups shed light in the importance of campus involvement in both their connection with the

institution, as well as contributing to their sense of self-worth discussed in a previous section.

Participant 6 talked about his involvement in campus organizations in particular, his role as business manager of the campus newspaper. When asked to discuss how this experience has helped shape his overall meaning via campus involvement he said, "I've always wanted to be a writer for a newspaper and I never got to be. So, it's like now I have some knowledge and being a thirty-year old and stepping back and seeing certain things you know, I can write about them. It's a goal that I had for myself once and I enjoy doing it". This quote sheds light on a few things. One, is his desire to pursue multiple goals as stated in earlier sections with his goal of earning his bachelor's degree and becoming a teacher. Second, his mentioning of his age and how he was able to step back is interpreted as him coming to terms with being an older student and engaging with the younger student population.

Participants 2 and 3, while not having any direct involvement with any specific campus organizations or activity, did discuss their individual takes on campus involvement. Participant 3 acknowledged the existence of some campus organizations and expressed some interest in participating in one. For example, he said "there's a lot of things at the institution that I currently haven't taken part in. I'm well aware of the activities here and I learned about some of them in this class". When asked what activities he was aware of, he said the campus newspaper. He stated further that "I never think about the institution having a newspaper or anything. That's something I might consider". Participant 2 was not involved with any organizations or activities but like Participant 3, acknowledged their presence on campus. For example, she said "when it

some to clubs and activities, it really depends on what the club or activity is about. I liked the art club, but I didn't have the time to do it". The quotes made by the participants sheds light on the reasons students lack campus involvement. Not having the time or a demonstrated understanding of the purpose of activities and organizations could have an adverse impact on their connection with the institution.

### **Summary**

By analyzing the participants' thoughts about the course and their place in it, the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of how first-year community college students perceive college success courses and what meaning they were able to make about their experiences in it. The participants reflected upon how the course impacted their self-image and how it helped them improve as students and develop a greater sense of purpose about themselves and their place on campus. Participants also described how their interactions with other students, relationships with their instructors, and connection to the institution helped with their college transitions. Finally, the participants discussed how the development of basic knowledge and skills, utilization of campus resources, and involvement in campus activities impacted their student engagement and academic competence. Chapter 5 will discuss the results and how they connect to the existing literature. In addition, Chapter 5 will provide suggestions for future research and provide recommendations for college success course professionals.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

This chapter will survey the results of this study and connect the existing literature on college success courses to student perceptions. In addition, this chapter provides recommendations for college success course professionals who develop the curriculum for these courses and provide instruction to the student populations enrolled in them. Finally, this chapter suggests recommendations for future research into college success courses.

#### **Significance of the Findings**

**Characteristics of the participants.** The participants selected for this study included six first-year students enrolled in a college success course, of which three were on academic probation and three were in good academic standing. In general, the statements made by the participants in regards to their initial perceptions of the course differed somewhat based on whether or not they were required to enroll in SS 101. With the exception of Participant 3, participants were required to enroll in SS 101 for reasons related to academic standing or program requirements. For example, Participants 2, 4, and 5 were required to enroll in the course because they were on academic probation whereas Participants 1 and 6 were required to enroll as a stipulation of their participation in a work and learn program. Overall, statements made by the participants as presented in the previous chapter shed some light on a relationship between mandatory enrollment and perceptions of the course.

In general, the participants who were required to enroll in the course due to academic probation status thought lesser about themselves and the course during the



initial stage of enrollment than participants required to enroll due to program requirements. These factors add to the findings the possibility of a relationship between student perceptions of college success courses and the circumstances that determine mandatory enrollment. In general, participants who were required to enroll in SS 101 as a result of academic probation revealed initial feelings of doubt whereas those in good academic standing carried with them more positive views of the course.

It is important to note however, that by the end of the semester the perceptions of the course by the participants on academic probation were in general, quite positive. Much of this had to do with the impact the course had on the development of participants' self-esteem, abilities to forge positive relationships with faculty and students, the development of valuable skills, and greater involvement with their campus environment. For example, these participants took away from the course a heightened sense of purpose, valuable personal relationships, and new personal meanings that resulted from their involvement in extracurricular activities on campus. This suggests that while the relationship between mandatory enrollment and course perceptions by those on academic probation was negative at first, positive gains were made throughout the course of the semester thereby shaping participants' experiences. This supports arguments made in the existing literature regarding mandatory enrollment in college strategies courses for at-risk students.

Another distinctive characteristic among the participants, which will be discussed further in this chapter, is age. Two of the participants were traditional aged college students whereas the other four were non-traditional aged students. Overall, there were differences in how the non-traditionally aged participants perceived themselves upon



initial enrollment in SS 101. For example, a few of the participants expressed a degree of apprehension about returning to college due to them being much older than the typical student. The others expressed slight concerns about being in classes with students who were younger and less experienced. Therefore, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that non-traditional aged students may experience greater difficulties than their traditional aged counterparts with regards to fitting in with their campus environments and as a result, greater transitional difficulties and attrition.

**Self-image.** By and large, the participants shared that their enrollment in SS 101 was a positive benefit in improving their self-image. While some of the participants expressed initial doubts about the course, they generally found it to be a useful resource to help them improve as individuals. Though different among the participants, they all expressed a greater sense of purpose when reflecting upon what it meant for them to be enrolled in the course. Another commonality among the participants was a greater sense of belonging on campus as a result of being enrolled in the course. These findings shed light on the significance that college success courses have on first-year students.

The statement made by Participant 1, “I was actually looking forward to the idea that I might be able to straighten out a few things” echoes his wanting to improve upon his poor study skills. This statement also reflects the findings of Shaw and Mattern (2013), in which students who perform below their predicted first-year grade point average (FYGPA) are at greater risk of dropping out or being placed on academic probation. Participant 1 also said that “basic study skills were something that I never had”, causing him to depart from high school an average student. This reflects the findings of Horton (2016), in which students who are underprepared academically are at a

greater risk of academic failure in college. Furthermore, the participant's admission to having poor study habits in high school reflects the findings of Cates and Schlefle (2011), in which they discovered a relationship between student readiness and college preparation programs. Finally, Participant 1's downward spiral following the death of his child caused him to question his being and thus, aligning with the findings Guassi-Moreia and Telzer (2017) in which changes in family cohesion during the transitional period in college can lead to depression and therefore, hindered persistence. Although this study focused on adolescents, there is reason to assume changes in family organization can also impact adult learners.

Participants 2 and 4 each expressed feelings of self-doubt and disappointment about enrolling in the course resulting from them being on academic probation. When talking about being placed on academic probation, Participant 2 said that "it did make me feel a little disappointed in myself" and that being required to enroll in SS 101 made her feel as if she was "having to go to detention". Participant 4 said that being on academic probation "made me feel like a total failure" and that her required enrollment in SS 101 made her feel what she described as "being punished". Both, however, described that throughout the course, they shed their initial thoughts and became open to the realization that the course would help them succeed. This reflects the findings of Laskey and Hetzel (2011), in which at-risk students who express openness and agreeableness to the use of academic support services would in turn, experience improved academic performance. Furthermore, these qualities align with Clark and Cundiff's (2011) recommendation of a study looking at an association between student traits and the success of college success courses.

When discussing the meaning of the course and how it aided in the development of their purpose, Participant 1 stated that the course gave him guidance and helped him become a better student and with that, a better parent. Likewise, Participant 4 stated that the course caused her to realize that she would have to work hard in order to be successful in college and hoped her daughter would benefit from witnessing her mother's achievements. Participants 3 and 6 both viewed the course as a means to further their education so they can accomplish their personal and career goals. These reflect the findings of Martin, Galentino, and Townshend (2014), in which successful students had clear goals, strong motivational levels, the ability to manage external demands, and self-empowerment.

Participants described how their ages affected their sense of belonging on campus. Participants 1 and 6 each expressed a degree of apprehension about returning to college due to them being much older than the typical student. Although they did not share any trepidation about attending college, Participants 3 and 4 both expressed slight concerns about being in classes with students who were younger and less experienced. Participant 2, on the other hand, shared that she felt too young to be in college and that her age contributed to her "limited involvement and sense of belonging on campus". These statements reflect the findings of O'Keefe (2013), in which students who experience feelings of rejection experience difficulty adjusting to college life and therefore, are at risk of dropping out and in those of Claybrooks and Taylor (2016) in which low emotional preparation, as noted by Participant 2, can lead to low persistence rates.

The need to gain a degree of self-value was expressed by the participants. Both Participants 1 and 4 shared that they had low levels of confidence and self-esteem that

caused them to question whether or not they could be successful students. Participant 2 shared that not having a declared major and doubts as to whether or not she was responsible enough for college caused her to reflect on what she needed to do in order to convince herself otherwise. Although Participant 5 shared that she was eager to attend college, conflicts with her prior classmates, caused self-esteem issues that in turn, led to her dropping out of the cosmetology program. These statements reflect the findings of Laskey and Hetzel (2011), in which personality traits such as neuroticism and extraversion may hinder the performance of at-risk college students. These statements also shed light on the findings of Stewart, et al.'s (2015) study connecting students' inability to resolve transitional issues with dropping out.

**Building relationships.** The participants in this study talked a great deal about their relationships with their fellow students, instructors, and with the institution. This theme is consistent with existing literature focusing on the retention of at-risk students. For example, several of the participants described positive relationship dynamics with the other students enrolled in their respective sections of SS 101. Participants 1 and 3 talked about positive rapport between themselves and other students in the classroom which both described as being "more engaging". A greater degree of communication between themselves and other students helped to create what Participants 4 and 5 described as "more open". These reflect the findings of O'Gara, et al. (2009), in which students enrolled in a college success course found it helpful in that it helped them establish relationships with their fellow students.

O'Gara, et al.'s (2009) findings also suggested that enrollment in a college success course helped students forge better relationships with their instructors.

Participants each talked about unique relationships they had with their SS 101 instructors compared to their relationships with instructors in other courses. For example, Participants 1 and 2 saw their SS 101 instructor as more of a friend than a teacher whereas their other instructors were seen as more “professional”. Participants 3 and 5 also viewed their relationship with their other instructors as more of a professional one, while their relationship with their SS 101 instructor was more “open”. The caring nature of their SS 101 instructor was talked about by Participants 4 and 6. Both described their instructor as one who cared about each student individually. They also shared similar sentiments about the instructors in their other classes. These relationships are also reflected in the findings of Schreiner, et al. (2011), in which faculty who connected with students and openly sought to impact their lives, played an essential role in retaining at-risk students.

Some of the participants agreed that they felt a greater connection with the institution as a result of taking SS 101. Participants 3 and 5 both reported that their relationships with the institution improved as a result of gaining increased awareness of the services offered to students on campus. These thoughts are reflected in the findings of O’Gara, et al. (2009), in that by being enrolled in a college success course, students received a better understanding of student service programs on campus and the findings of Saenz, et al. (2011), that revealed greater levels of student engagement via the use of student services. Although participants 1 and 4 did not think that enrollment in SS 101 helped improve their relationship with the institution, they nevertheless expressed an already existing relationship resulting from previous enrollment at the college.

Participant 1 talked about his “personal attachment” due to knowing a number of



employees at the institution while participant 4 felt that she could always rely on the institution for help. These are reflected in Schreiner, et al.'s (2011) study on the effects of faculty and staff behavior on student retention.

**Developing competence.** Improved abilities were echoed by the participants when discussing the benefit of being enrolled in SS 101. Some of the participants credited the course for giving them insight into the various resources and services available to students on campus. Participants 3 and 5 talked about how the course helped raise their awareness about the different forms of financial assistance available to students. Participants 4 and 6 also credited the course with giving them increased knowledge about campus resources. The scavenger hunt activity designed by the instructor to help students seek out student services was cited by both as one of the major benefits of the course. These are reflected in Horton's (2012) findings that the availability of student support services are a significant factor in retaining at-risk students. Although cost association between the institution and these services was not a focus of this research, their emphasis and availability do align with Chen's (2012) findings that students who attended institutions with greater student services expenditures contribute towards greater levels of student success.

Some of the participants shared that the course aided in their development of basic skills in the form of note-taking and time-management. This aligns with Kuh, et al.'s (2008) findings linking student engagement, academic achievement, and persistence and Ben-Avie, et al.'s (2012) and Bers and Younger's (2014) studies that enrollment in a college success course often lead to improved academic skills. This is further supported in Shapiro, et al.'s (2014) findings that students who enrolled in these courses



experienced better grades. Participants 1, 2, and 5 talked about the academic benefits of enhanced note-taking abilities. Participants 2 and 5 said that they learned how to focus more on key points in a lecture rather than trying to write lectures down word for word. By doing so, Participant 2 became more organized and Participant 5 shared that as a result, she had a lesser degree of test anxiety. Participant 1 also shared that not only did he experience higher test scores that he, along with Participant 2, developed greater basic studying skills.

With the exception of Participant 1, participants talked about how the course helped improve their time management abilities. Participants 3 and 6 shared how time management lessons helped them to realize how much time they had previously wasted by partaking in certain activities such as video game playing. Participant 2, said that while she was still working to improve her time management skills, she had learned how to use her time to complete homework before she went home for the day. Participant 4 realized that her poor time management skills caused her to procrastinate, finding herself rushing at the last minute to complete assignments. Participant 5 also reflected a past history of procrastination that she corrected as a result of a time management activity in her class. These, along with statements made by Participants 1 and 2 regarding the relationship between note-taking and basic study skills, align with O’Gara, et al.’s (2009) findings that students enrolled in college success courses develop important skills such as time management and study skills and Krumreri-Mancuso, et al.’s (2013) findings that found a relationship between time management skills and student success.

Improved problem-solving and stress management skills were discussed by some of the participants. Participants 4 and 5 said that the development of these skills helped

them resolve conflict. Participant 4 talked about conflict between her and an instructor while Participant 5 cited conflict among other students as one of her reasons for dropping out of the cosmetology program. Both credited the problem-solving skills learned from the course as a tool to help them better manage interpersonal conflict. Participant 6 talked about his development of problem-solving skills as a result of a group project in which a fellow student did not participate. The use of these skills by the participants' ties into Duggan and Williams's (2011) findings that students enrolled in a college success course found the information provided to them in class to be useful. Though the findings did not specifically mention problem-solving and stress management skills, it can be concluded that the participants' use of these skills proved advantageous.

Opportunities for increased campus involvement, while acknowledged by participants, were not pursued by all. Participants 1 and 3, were aware of campus activities and organizations but due to time constraints, were either unable or unwilling to participate. Likewise, Participant 2 acknowledged the opportunities for campus involvement and in addition to time constraints, expressed little interest in the ones available. While the impact of not being involved in campus life was not discussed by the participants, nor was the idea pursued in the current study, it is safe to assume that the lack of involvement may have been an additional factor in Participant 2's decision to not enroll in the fall semester. If so, this would align itself with Claybrooks's and Taylor's (2016) findings that low persistence rates among first-year students are negatively impacted by an overall with campus life that in turn, may hinder satisfaction in the overall college experience.

On the contrary, Participants 4 and 5 talked about the information pertaining to campus activities given to them by their SS 101 instructors and how their involvement in said activities helped shape their overall experiences. This aligns itself with Jamelske's (2008) study connecting college success courses and their purpose to connect students to college life to the idea of first-year student persistence to the second year. Participant 6 also talked about how his involvement with the campus newspaper helped shape his college experience. With this, he discussed how he was able to reflect upon his experiences when writing articles and how his involvement also helped him to set goals and to connect with the younger student population. These variables are consistent with O'Keeffe's (2013) study on students' degrees of self-belonging and Martin, et al.'s (2014) findings connecting persistence with students' goal-setting and Pruett and Absher's (2015) findings linking students' participation in college activities and greater persistence levels.

**Theoretical framework.** The theoretical framework guiding this study consisted of the ideas of college transition and persistence of at-risk college students. Transition, which has been defined by Barefoot, et al. (2005) as the capacity to attain academic success while adjusting to the individual and interpersonal challenges of college life, and issues pertaining to areas evident in several comments made by the participants as were the four factors identified by Schlossberg (as cited in Evans, et al., 2010) that influence transition. Upon enrolling in SS 101, the participants reflected on their situations and how enrollment in the course provided them with the opportunity to improve. For example, Participant 1 shared that he thought the course could help him with his study skills. This was also shared by Participants 2 and 4 who realized that enrollment would

help them develop the skills needed to succeed in college. Participant 3 talked about how the course helped him get a jump start obtaining useful information to help him when he transfers.

In general, the participants revealed important strides in their overall sense of self via enrollment in the course that was made evident by an increased sense of purpose and belonging. Participants 1 and 4 talked about the course giving them the abilities to be better parents. Participants 3 and 6 both talked about the course shaping their long-term goal projections and career opportunities. Due to a perceived age gap Participants 1 and 6, and to a degree with Participant 4, were able to feel a greater sense of belonging as a result of interaction with younger students enrolled in the course. The participants, along with Participant 2, also talked about regaining a sense of validation by taking the course that helped them anywhere from feeling valued to discovering how to what Participant 6 described as “living up to potential”.

The development of some much-needed support was significant among the participants. Participants 1 and 4 shed light on the importance of communication between themselves and their fellow SS 101 students. For example, Participant 4 said “I felt like I could talk more openly with the students there [SS 101] than I could in my other classes” and Participant 1 described his interactions with fellow students as “more social” than those in his other classes. Participants 3 and 5, while discussing relations with their instructor, talked about her willingness to accommodate their needs while Participant’s 4 and 6 shared a personal connection with their instructor as a result of her demeanor and willingness to help. Finally, the participants talked about a greater sense

of institutional support through taking the course that according to Participant 3, “made me want to spend more time on campus”.

The strategies that aided the participants with their transitions were revealed through their talks about the course and how it helped them improve on things such as problem-solving and stress management. In particular, Participant 4 cited improvements with conflict resolution for helping solve a problem she was having with an instructor that helped her “learn how to have a decent conversation in order to settle differences” whereas Participant 5 acknowledged conflict avoidance but was “trying” when talking about conflict management. Finally, Participant 6 talked about his problem-solving skills developing in the course as a result of a fellow student’s absence during a group project.

The interactive experiences identified by Tinto’s (1987) theory of individual departure as a major factor in student transition and persistence were talked about by the majority of the participants in their discussions about individual interactions at the institution. In addition to increased interactions between themselves, their instructors, and other students, a number of the participants talked about their involvement in campus activities and organizations that according to Tinto (1987), helped further transition and decrease the likelihood of dropout. For example, Participants 4 and 5 involvements in their respective campus activities helped immensely in shaping their meanings. Participant 4 stated that she “felt I could further help anyone who has an issue or to better educate people who do have an issue” when she talked about her involvement in the LBGQT group on campus. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 5 about her involvement in the buddy for a day program on campus as well as Participant 6 whose meaning was shaped through his involvement in the campus newspaper.



Participants 1 and 3 did not appear to be affected by the lack of their involvement in campus activities. However, both participants talked about the positive impacts of their interactions with their instructors and fellow students that arguably align with Tinto's argument and therefore, have not hindered their persistence at the time of this study. Participant 2, on the other hand, openly talked about her plan not to attend school during the fall semester. The reason, according to the Participant, had more to do with her perceived lack of readiness than with interactions. However, she mentioned during the interview a "limited sense of belonging" on campus that was likely due to her limited interaction with fellow students and her lack of involvement and interest in campus activities that in turn, support Tinto's theory.

### **Recommendations for College Success Course Professionals**

**Emphasize basic study skills.** This study revealed thematic support for the relationship between student success and college success courses. A common consensus among participants was that the course was instrumental in helping them develop specific skills essential for academic success and retention. For example, participants in the current study discussed how the course helped them to develop better skills pertaining to time management, problem-solving, note-taking, and overall study habits. Furthermore, participants revealed how significant improvements in these areas and as a result, experienced positive changes in their self-perceptions of being enrolled in the course and in their academic abilities. Therefore, college success course leaders must take into consideration the importance of students' skill development in these areas and find ways to monitor and assess critical skills developed by students to ensure their continuation in course curriculum.



**Enlist the support of faculty.** This study revealed significant connections between participants and their instructors. The common agreement among the participants was a closer personal connection between themselves and their respective SS 101 instructors. These connections in turn, led to them developing a greater sense of belonging among some participants and a greater sense of validation by others. Though perceived to have been less personal and more professional, participants' relationships with their other instructors was in general, described as being positive. These findings, in conjunction with the ones in Schreiner, et al.'s (2011) study on the effects of faculty behavior on at-risk retention must be taken into account by college success course leaders in order to enlist and maintain the support of their faculty to assure that a positive rapport with students, especially those in their first-year, in order to ensure a smoother transition.

In order to ensure greater and continued collaboration and support from faculty, college success course leaders should consider the following: First, requiring all faculty who teach college success courses to enroll in and complete mandatory training in order to help them become better qualified instructors of these courses. As a result, instructional faculty would be given more insight into the purpose of success courses and how to deliver the type of instruction needed in order to help first-year populations successfully navigate their college experiences. Second, staff development opportunities should be available to all faculty to ensure a greater understanding of the challenges faced by first-year population, how to better engage these students in order to increase levels of academic efficacy, and to help them utilize campus services necessary for successful transition.

**Require the use of student services.** The current study revealed mixed thematic results among the participants when talking about the effective use of campus resources. Some participants, for example, discussed the information they had received in their SS 101 course about the different types of financial aid, but gave no mention of utilizing the financial aid office or enlisting the assistance of the professionals in the department. Other participants discussed how the course helped them locate various services on campus but again, stopped short of actually utilizing the services available. Overall, this study showed more of an awareness of student services as opposed to their actual use. Therefore, college success course leaders should encourage greater use of these services among their first-year students to help ensure what Horton (2013) found to be an important factor in their retention.

To ensure greater use of student services available to first-year populations, college success course leaders should consider the following: First, course leaders must place greater emphasis on campus services and their students' use of said amenities. Adding to the course's curriculum, activities similar to those discussed in the previous chapter by Participants 4 and 6 designed to familiarize students with campus services, would enhance students' exposure to these services and provide them the opportunity to establish a better understanding of student services. With this, projects requiring students to meet with student services professionals and reflecting upon their experiences should be assigned to guarantee student usage of these services. Second, course leaders should collaborate with student services to establish a rapport between academic and student affairs professionals in order to develop and implements strategies designed to make student services a greater part of the first-year experience.

**Ensure campus involvement.** This study revealed interest among the participants in being involved in extracurricular activities on campus. A few of the participants shared how their involvement in campus organizations shaped their meanings in that doing so helped them feel more of a connection to the campus. Another participant talked about how his role in a student organization helped to develop his purpose. Other participants however, expressed an interest in campus involvement but lacked the time whereas another expressed limited interest all together. Overall this study revealed the benefits of extracurricular student involvement on campus. However, the current study revealed a lack in campus involvement by some of its participants. Therefore, there is a risk of attrition among first-year students in what Claybrooks and Taylor (2016) identified as a dissatisfaction with campus life and college experiences.

In order to ensure greater student involvement on campus, college success course leaders should take into consideration the following: First, regularly present to classes information about student organizations and campus events as a way to help students become familiar with the opportunities available to them. Doing so will confirm that students are given the opportunity to learn about the various aspects of student life and that course leaders are stressing the importance of student involvement. Second, course leaders should collaborate with student affairs professionals to find ways to increase student involvement on campus. This could be accomplished by creating class projects requiring students to volunteer in a campus event or organization in order to guarantee extracurricular involvement. Finally, ask that students reflect on their extracurricular experiences in order to gauge their degree of interest and how to better ensure continued involvement.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

There are several suggestions for future research regarding student perceptions of college success courses and forthcoming studies on this topic may benefit from a wider pool of participants to include a larger variety of students to interview. First, recent studies have focused their strengths on the effects of college success courses on first-year students. Although the majority of research is aimed towards the relationship between these courses and first-year students, the effects of them on their second-year counterparts should not be ignored. Therefore, an analysis focusing on second-year student perceptions is recommended and could shed further light on Bers's and Schuetz's (2011) study into the retention issues of second-year students and how success courses may help retain those students and prepare them for transfer to four-year institutions or entry into the workforce.

Second, the participants interviewed for this study all hailed from the same institution. The site for this study was small, rural institution. Students who attend the institution are likely to have different characteristics and therefore, different experiences than students at larger, metropolitan ones. Future studies should also take into account the student demographics at larger, urban institutions and how greater levels of racial and ethnic diversity among students will shape the experiences of students enrolled in college success courses. Studies comparing the perceptions of white students and students of color may shed further light on Zhang's and Smith's (2011) research into the effects of race and college transition.

Third, it was not made clear in the current study the generational status of the participants and as a result, first-generation student status was not a feature in the current

study. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies focus upon the effects of college success courses on first-generation students. The findings in Stephens, et al. (2014) revealed that first-generation students were less likely to utilize campus resources and therefore, experienced greater transitional difficulties than their non-first-generation counterparts. Therefore, a study analyzing first-generational students' perceptions of a college success course may help shed more light on the reasons as to why and how professionals in the field can better develop ways to encourage students from this population to utilize campus resources that will help them in their transition and retention.

Fourth, due to the reoccurring theme regarding the ages of some of the participants in the current study, it is strongly recommended that future research be conducted on the experiences of non-traditional students. In specific, forthcoming studies may want to consider showcasing the effects college success courses have on this population and how the courses contribute to the overall meanings made by members of this population. Information from these studies can be useful for professionals by helping to further their understandings of the transitional difficulties felt by these students due to the college age gap and how to develop specific strategies designed to retain them. In addition, understanding and developing ways to assist these types of students develop a greater sense of belonging would also serve as an aide for greater retention rates of non-traditional students.

Finally, with the exception of one participant, the remainder of participants in the current study were required to enroll in the college success course due to academic probation status or program requirements. The initial perceptions of the course held by



the participant who took the course as an elective, as well as the participants who enrolled in the course due to program requirements, were positive. The initial perceptions of participants on academic probation, on the other hand, were not. Therefore, future research should seek to uncover the perceptions of students who are required to enroll in college success courses versus students who enroll in college success courses voluntarily. Information from these studies can be useful for success course professionals in order to identify the reasons why students are enrolled in their courses and how they can develop curriculums to fit students' needs.

### **Conclusion**

This study analyzed the perceptions of first-year students enrolled in a college success course and the meanings made by those who participated in the study. Participants described their experiences in the course and how it impacted their self-image, shaped their relationships at the institution, and shaped their academic competence and student engagement. These experiences in general, allowed the participants to make individual meanings about how the course helped to define themselves as individuals and how it prepared them to move forward with their personal and academic goals. Although this study did not measure participants' academic success in terms of GPA and retention, it did reveal the perceived impact college success courses have on first-year students' self-esteem, sense of emotional belonging, and a relationship between student engagement and academic aptitude. Overall, this study provided reasonable evidence of the continued need for college success courses and how enrollment can aid first-year students with their college transition.



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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Protocol**

### Demographic Questions

1. Age and year in school?
2. Major/minor?
3. Fulltime/part-time?
4. Place of residence?
5. Enter college straight from high school?
6. Race?
7. Gender?

Research Question 1: What are first-year students' perceptions of enrolling in a college success course?

1. Describe your initial feelings towards this class?
2. Why did you enroll in this class?
3. What does it mean to you to be enrolled in this class?
4. How did your perceptions towards the class change over time?

Research Question 2: What aspects of the course are beneficial for students?

1. How has your enrollment in this class impacted your sense of belonging on campus?
2. How did your knowledge of campus resources increase by taking this class?
  - a. For example: Financial aid.
3. How has your knowledge/skills in the following areas changed as a result of your being in this class?
  - a. Test-taking/note-taking
  - b. Time management

- c. Course scheduling
- d. School/work balance
- e. Use of support services/information resources (e.g. financial aid, counseling, library, etc.)
- f. Degree requirements

Research Question 3: What course environmental factors impacted students' progress throughout the course?

1. Describe your interactions with other students in this course. How are they similar/different to your interactions with students in other courses?
2. Describe your relationship with the instructor of this course. How is it similar/different to your relationship with other instructors?
3. Describe how the instructor's teaching style impacted your progress throughout the course.
4. Describe whether the course's topics were useful to you throughout the course. Which topics helped you the most? Which topics helped you the least?

Research Question 4: What impact does this course have on student engagement and academic competence?

1. How have you used this course to improve on your academic skills?
2. What supportive strategies do you feel you have learned by taking this class?
  - a. For example: Problem solving, stress management, taking action.
3. Has your relationship with the institution changed as a result of taking this course? Do you feel it is supportive?

4. In addition to attending class, how are you involved on campus? What opportunities for involvement did you learn about in this class?

**Appendix B**  
**Observation Protocol**



During each class session, the researcher will be recording observations about the following topics.

1. Interactions with the class.
  - a. Do students respond to one another during class? What do they say?
  - b. Are students attentive during class?
  - c. How is their nonverbal behavior characterized?
2. Interactions between students and instructors.
  - a. What do the students say to the instructors? What do the instructors say to the students?
  - b. How do students respond to comments made by their instructors?
  - c. How is their nonverbal behavior characterized?

## **Appendix C**

### **Sample Email to Participants**

Hello,

You are invited to participate in a study of first-year community college students and their perceptions about college success courses. You have been invited to participate in this study because you have been identified as a first-year student currently enrolled in a college success course. This study is being conducted by Aaron Walk, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University, and is being advised by Dr. Richard Roberts of the Department of Counseling and Student Development at EIU.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you are interested in participating, please contact Aaron Walk at [ajwalk@eiu.edu](mailto:ajwalk@eiu.edu) or (217) 273-7530 to schedule an interview time. Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form at the time of the scheduled interview. Interviews will last approximately and will not exceed one hour. Each participant will be given a \$20 Walmart gift card as an incentive.

Please direct any questions and/or concerns about this study to Aaron Walk. Thank you for considering participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Aaron J. Walk, M.A.  
M.S. Candidate, College Student Affairs  
Graduate Assistant, Counseling & Student Development  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Avenue  
Charleston, IL  
(217) 581-2400  
[ajwalk@eiu.edu](mailto:ajwalk@eiu.edu)

**Appendix D**  
**Informed Consent Form**

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### **Student Perceptions of a College Success Course: A Phenomenological Approach**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Aaron Walk and Dr. Richard Roberts (faculty sponsor) from the Counseling and Student Development department at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you identify as a first-year community college student enrolled in a college success course.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the proposed research is to analyze how first-year community college students make meaning about a college success course. A secondary purpose of the research is to understand how their perspectives factor into the purpose of the community college.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will last approximately one hour. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences and your perceptions of the college success course. Your interview will be audio recorded and stored on the researcher's computer.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts that will arise from participating in this study.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Participants may benefit from being able to reflect on their experiences and perceptions stemming from their enrollment in a college success course.

This study may also benefit colleges and universities. Data collected from the study may give institutions more insight on the experiences and perceptions of the students enrolled in their college success courses.

- **INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION**

Participants in this study will each receive a \$20 gift card from Walmart.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by removing identifying information, particularly names, from the interview transcripts. Participant names will not be present on any transcript materials, nor will they be in the final research report. Only the researcher and faculty advisor will have access to transcripts and recorded interviews. The audio recording files of the interviews will be kept for 3 years and then destroyed, as required by the IRB.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Aaron Walk, Principal Investigator  
217-273-7530  
ajwalk@eiu.edu

Dr. Richard Roberts, Faculty Advisor  
217-581-2400  
rroberts@eiu.edu



- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
 Eastern Illinois University  
 600 Lincoln Ave.  
 Charleston, IL 61920  
 Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
 E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date