

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE, SOCIAL
NETWORKS, AND NEW STUDENT
ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

By

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CHAPTER I

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

With so many students entering the “open door” (access for all students that come to a) community college system in our nation today, it is noteworthy that approximately 50 percent of community college freshmen do not complete a program of study, an associate’s degree or even a certificate program (Brawer, 1996; Tinto, 1987). Given this startling statistic, it is no wonder that many institutions are implementing or upgrading their freshmen orientation programs (Kruger, 1999). “[M]ore than ever before, new students need help during the transition from high school or work to the college environment” (Gordon & Grites, 1984, p. 315).

Coll and VonSeggern (1991) found that successful orientation programs provide students with: (a) information about courses and plans of study; (b) the institution’s requirements for students; (c) information about services dealing with students’ interests, values, and abilities; (d) access to faculty; (e) services that aid in the transition to college; and (f) financial aid information. Cuseo (1991) recommends that student orientation programs cover a variety of topics such as goal setting, self-esteem, learning skills and time management. “No matter how carefully planned and executed, programs that freshmen do not consider beneficial are not effective” (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989, p. 93). It has been found that students, who are satisfied with their orientation experience, tend to persist, have lower dropout rates, have higher graduation rates and have an increased

sense of satisfaction with their academic preparation (Pascarella et al, 1978). Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfle (1986) stated that student orientation had relatively substantial and significant effects on both social integration during college and subsequent commitment to the institution attended. “It appears that the orientation experience impacted on freshmen persistence largely by facilitating a student’s initial ability to cope with a new set of social challenges in an unfamiliar environment” (pp. 169-170).

Harvard University was the first in the United States of America to offer a formalized student orientation program where experienced students supported new students by helping them make the transition to the higher education institution. The assistance came in the form of students helping students’ transition to the university (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Over the years, orientation programs have changed from a “fun and games” mind-set to a more in-depth immersion into the academic community (Noel, et al, 1985). Researchers have found that the first six months of the freshman year is a crucial time for students and that it is particularly critical that counseling services be made available. In addition, students who make use of advising are retained at a higher rate than those who do not make use of advising (Beal & Noel, 1979).

Orientation programs, which assist entering students in developing learning skills and give them access to a one-on-one relationship with faculty, increase student retention as well (Titley, 1985). It has been found that well-planned and integrated programs include components focused on cultural differences, enabling students to embrace the differences of others and the entire college student population (Lenning, et al, 1980; Smith, 1989; Boyer, 1987; Smith, 1989).

For freshman orientation programs to be successful they must have input from both faculty and student services personnel (Gardner, 1986). Peer advisors can be very useful as well in presenting social information to the new students in a way that is open, interesting and engaging (Ender & Winston, 1984). A very important focus of the orientation staff should be to assist students in achieving academic success by teaching study skills such as note-taking, writing, proofreading, and asking questions (Young, et al, 1989).

In addition to the input of faculty and student services personnel into orientation programs and their successfulness, orientation programs must have a staff that is dedicated to the student's success. The Council for Academic Standards (1988) stated, "The student orientation program must have adequate and qualified professional staff to fulfill its mission and to implement all aspects of the program" (p. 23). Mullendore (1992) reiterates the idea of trained staff when, in relation to orientation directors, he says, "The orientation director must be extremely proficient in coordination, negotiation, supervision, and public relations in order to effectively meander through the institutional milieu and implement a meaningful and successful program or a series of programs" (p. 43).

In relation to orientation, studies of retention show the key factor in student satisfaction is quality interaction with individual faculty members and their student peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978; 1991). In addition, qualified advisors are a critical component needed when helping students make an easy academic transition (Frost, 1991). The research also indicates that students who are directly involved with other students and faculty are more likely to persist and obtain degrees. They are less likely to

drop out because they perceive that they are an integral part of the institution. The foundation for the development of these relationships can be laid during the orientation process (Astin, 1993).

The Council for Academic Standards (1988) recognized orientation and stated, “the mission of orientation must be to provide for continuing services and assistance that will: aid new students in their transition to the institution; expose new students to the broad educational opportunities of the institution; and integrate new students into the life of the institution” (p. 21). This notion of integration or “connecting” new students into the life of an institution has been described in a variety of ways. Boyer (1987) added that “a successful freshman year program will convince students that they are part of an intellectually vital, caring community” (p. 57) while Tinto (1988) noted that “institutions must be sensitive to the separation and transitional difficulties new students face” (p. 451). Research has further provided three necessary components of a successful orientation program: a sense of community, more and better student involvement in the college, and social and academic integration (Sanford, 1969; Astin, 1977; Pace, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987).

Statement of the Problem

Research shows that 50% of incoming college freshmen students do not persist in a program of study (Brawer, 1996; Tinto 1987). Some incoming freshmen students form new social ties with other students. In order to strengthen student retention, community colleges have developed programs such as new student orientation programs to foster new social ties. Whether a newly implemented orientation program at a community

college assisted in new weak tie development for those students that participated is unknown. The phenomenon of students' social ties in relationship to academic persistence is unanswered in relation to implemented orientation programs.

This study of student social networks is needed to better understand the phenomenon of the student attrition rate. Additionally, this study is needed to explore whether students' social networks are related to their academic success. Exploring the phenomenon of students' social networks in relationship to their academic persistence remains the question as to whether the students' participation in the orientation program supported the formation of new ties or whether new ties are obtained regardless of students' participation in the orientation program.

Granovetter's prior research (1973; 1983) would explain the anomaly of limited student academic success despite programs designed to facilitate success in terms of the underdevelopment of weak ties needed to promote the new learning essential for students' academic success and persistence. Weak ties foster new relationships, which students need to build connections for learning that is linked to the traditional classroom culture and its activities. Theoretically, students who develop new weak ties should be able to better connect at an institution and have a greater chance of persistence (Thomas, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

Through the lens of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) strength of ties, the purpose of this case study was to examine students' social networks in relationship to their academic persistence in order to help the college retain students. Students who attended the

orientation program as well as students who have not attended the orientation program will be interviewed to determine whether the orientation program aided in new tie development. Additionally, the issue of students' social networks in relationship to their academic performance will be explored to determine if there is a correlation between students' social networks and students' academic persistence at a mid-western community college. The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what do students credit their academic success or failure?
2. In what way does student persistence relate to Granovetter's strength of ties analysis?
3. What role, if any, did a new student orientation program have in supporting student persistence?
4. How useful is Granovetter's strength of ties in explaining students' lack of academic persistence?

Orienting Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, the amounts of time people have to interact with other people affects the ties, or relationships, they develop or have developed. According to Granovetter (1973; 1983), strong ties are characterized by relationships with family and close friends that anchor traditional views. Strong ties exist between individuals with similar beliefs and thoughts usually close friends and family members. Strong ties are created because "the more frequently persons interact with one another, the stronger their sentiments of friendship for one another are apt to be" (Homans, 1950, p.133).

Alternatively, weak ties, characterized by acquaintances or friends of friends, provide a bridge to new views and social ideas. “[I]ndividuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends” (Granovetter, 1983, p. 202). Weak ties are described as the linkage between an individual and a friend or an acquaintance or friends of friends. Weak ties are significant because they provide people with access to different information and provide bridges to new, socially different ideas (Granovetter, 1973).

The strength of a tie is dependent on the combination of four components: “the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Granovetter noted that the four components were “somewhat independent of each other, though... highly intracorellated” (p. 1361). Each of the four components is described now as to how they are viewed within the context of this study.

Time

Time involves the frequency and duration of contacts between the respondent and his/her choice (Granovetter, 1973). The characteristic of time deals directly with the frequency and duration between the two individuals identified with a tie. For this study, the duration of interaction between students and whom they spend time with was used to examine the student’s ties while attending the college. This time spent might be identified as study time or recreational time.

Emotional Intensity

Intensity is a factor that deals with the emotions involved in a relationship (Granovetter, 1973) and the degree of commitment on the part of the individuals (students) involved in the tie to maintain the relationship over time (Baker, 1994). For the purpose of this study, respondents were asked questions dealing with the length of the relationship and whether the person (s) in the relationship was (were) considered a friend or acquaintance and whether the relationship changed while the respondents were taking classes at the college.

Intimacy

The notion of intimacy deals with philosophical issues, goals and trust (Granovetter, 1973.) Strength of ties in this study was measured by the amount of common knowledge that the network members shared. Networks where members had the same backgrounds and traveled in the same social circles were characterized as strong ties. Networks where members have different backgrounds and travel in different social circles were characterized as weak ties (Baker, 1994).

Reciprocal Services

A reciprocal service refers to the mutual benefit that individuals within a relationship receive (Granovetter, 1973). According to Forsyth and Hoy (1978), a network where the interaction between members was rewarding was characterized as likely to continue. For the purposes of this study, a reward could be a favor or simply advice for the student seeking it, and the reciprocity on the part of the person giving

advice could be simply self-satisfaction, a new friend, or possibly a professional prodigy.

Summarizing network research, Wasserman and Faust (1994) stated,

Social network analysis provides a precise way to define important social concepts, a theoretical alternative to the assumption of independent social actors, and a framework for testing theories about structured social relationships (p.17).

Methodological Design

This study was designed as a case study. A qualitative research design method was selected because I wanted to be highly involved in the experiences and detail the participants would relay to me (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly configured (p. 181). Additionally, I found it appealing that research questions in a qualitative study change as the researcher discovers what should be asked in a study (Creswell, 2003).

After a review of the various types of qualitative research, I believe this study is more closely associated to the definition of a case study. The researcher explores a program in depth, an event, an activity, a process...the case(s) are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). This case study looks at the event of academic success in a community college in relationship to the students' social networks.

Individual semi-structured interviews were used along with e-mail correspondence from some of the participants in this study. Additionally, document analysis was employed to review the records of the students to see who has persisted at the community college in relationship to those who have not.

Sixteen students were purposely selected for this study. Ten students were selected who had not been academically successful at the institution after attending a newly implemented orientation program. Three students were selected who attended the orientation program and had been academically successful and three students were selected who had been academically successful at the community college but did not attend the orientation program. The students who were not academically successful after attending the orientation program were selected by analyzing all of the students who had participated in the orientation program but had not persisted at the institution after one year through document review of their academic records. Those who had not persisted were contacted and ten students agreed to participate in the study. The three students who had attended the orientation program and had persisted at the institution were purposely selected by randomly visiting several classes at the institution and seeking participants who attended the orientation program and were willing to participate in the study. The remaining three students who were selected who had been academically successful after one year at the institution but did not attend the orientation program were selected the same way as those who had attended the orientation program and had persisted at the institution. “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants... that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2003, p.185).

Researcher

I, the researcher, have worked in higher education for over 13 years. I have been involved in numerous aspects of student services over my higher education career. My

professional involvement in student services has included working in the residence hall system, as a university patrol officer, a transfer coordinator, an instructor, and a coordinator of a learning lab in an industrial setting. For five and one-half years I served as dean of student services at a large multi-campus community college that has over seven thousand students.

While I was in the position as dean of student services at the institution studied, the position helped me to direct my research. The college at which I was employed was very receptive of the new student orientation program that had been implemented, and there has been much discussion on the issue of student retention at this institution, within the state of Oklahoma, and nationally. I have presented the campus' orientation model within the state of Oklahoma as well as within a community college consortium from North Texas. I am now the chief student affairs officer at a much smaller institution in the state of Texas. My new institution has an enrollment of approximately 2,000 students.

It is my assumption that students who establish weak social ties with other students, faculty, or staff at the college are more likely to persist within a new learning environment as compared to students who do not. The literature points out that limited informal contact with other people at the college is one of the reasons that students do not persist (Tinto, 1987). With the establishment of new weak ties, in part due to the new student orientation program, I believed the students who have not been successful would report that they did not establish weak ties that could have helped them to persist in school.

It was the process of visiting with the students to find out their perspective about persistence and the new student orientation program that most intrigued me about this study. I thoroughly enjoyed visiting with students to discover their realities and challenges. This notion of students' realities and their sensemaking of those realities were introduced to me during my courses of study in the doctoral program at Oklahoma State University. Karl Weick (1993) looked at sensemaking in organizations and I was greatly interested in this same notion of sensemaking from the students' perspective.

Site Selection

The site for this study was a community college campus within a multi-campus community college structure located in a midwestern state. The college officially opened its doors to 2,800 students in the fall of 1970 by renting several floors of a downtown building from a local company. By 1974 the college purchased some additional land north of the current downtown campus location and the entire 6-story building from the company that had rented the college its first space. By January of 1979 the new northeast campus opened to about 500 students. Currently, the northeast campus serves about 4,300 students and the downtown campus serves approximately 7,500 students.

By the fall of 1981 the college had become the third largest college in the state and also acquired additional land for its third location. The southeast campus opened in 1984 and it currently serves about 7,500 students. In the early 1990's the college finalized plans for the fourth campus in the western portion of the city. The west campus opened for the summer 1996 term and currently serves approximately 2,500 students.

The college has continued to experience healthy growth over the years and enjoys a local tax base to supplement the state appropriated funds. New fitness centers have recently been constructed at the downtown and northeast campus, and currently a new fitness center is underway at the southeast campus; the west campus should begin construction of their fitness center very soon. Based on institutional research, within the past few years the college has boasted the largest numbers of first time entering freshmen in the state.

In 1996, along with the west campus opening its doors, the college changed its name from a junior college to a community college. The board thought the college had always been a “community college” and thought the name should reflect that.

In addition to the college’s interesting history, the college is dedicated to innovation with its early development of computer technology and instruction. Active partnerships with local companies have helped the college assist the metroplex by training the workers that need specialized training. With the colleges corporate and contract training initiatives many degree programs have been tailor-made to assist students and companies with training and work force education. In 1998 the college teamed up with the local technology center and opened a joint venture called “The Eighth Floor.” This joint collaboration assists in training public and private school teachers in the metroplex in integrating technology into the classroom. The project has been very successful, and to date numerous local educators have benefited from this project. The college continues to evolve and to make a mark for itself for the future. Enrollments continue to soar, and the partnerships with other institutions in the area provide higher education to the community. The future of the college continues to look bright.

Demographics

The demographics of the college are as follows. Approximately 22,500 students comprised the recent fall semester and about 21, 800 students' enrolled last spring semester. Females make up 60 percent; men 40 percent of those attending the college. Racial-ethnic breakdown is as follows: 74 percent Caucasian students, 9 percent African American students, 3 percent Asian students, 6 percent Native American students, 3 percent Hispanic students, 3 percent of students categorized as "other," and 2 percent of students categorized as "no response."

The age distribution is 37 percent of them are 21 years or younger, 34 percent of them are between 22-31 years old, 15 percent are between 32-41 years old, 10 percent are between 42-51 years old, 3 percent are 52-61 years old, and 1 percent of the student population is over 61 years old. In addition to age, the majors of the students are reported as 68 percent university parallel and 32 percent workforce development.

The respondents in the study were found to represent a very close cross section of the population of the educational institution. Sixty percent of the college's population is female, 62 percent of the respondents interviewed were female, and 37 percent of the college's population is under 21 years of age. In this study 50 percent of the students interviewed were under 21 years of age. It should be noted that the majority of students that participate in the orientation program are under the age of 21. As noted earlier, 34 percent of the school's population is between the ages of 22-31, and 25 percent of the interviewed population was in this category. Also, as noted earlier, 15 percent of the population is between the ages of 32-41, and the interviewed subjects in this area

numbered 6 percent. Also, ten percent of the school's population is between the ages of 42-51, and in this study nineteen percent were within this age range.

Race demographics closely resembled the schools ethnic percentages. Seventy-four percent of the school's students were Caucasian, and 69 percent of those interviewed were Caucasian. The school reports an African American population of slightly more than 9 percent, and the study had 12 percent representation from African Americans. Native Americans comprise 6 percent of the school's population, and this study's respondents had a 12 percent representation. Finally, the school reports a 3 percent Hispanic population, and this study's respondents had 6 percent involvement in this category.

Data Needs

Data needed for this study describe the social networks of students' strong and weak ties and the impact of these network associations on the students' retention efforts. Specifically, I needed to know the relationships students developed upon entry into higher education and their interpretation or sense-making, as described by Weick (1993), and the impact of those relationships. These data were needed to analyze the relationship ties of the students to see if there were new ties developed. The characteristics of time, intensity, intimacy and reciprocity in relation to those relationships were sought as well.

Data Sources

The subjects needed for this study were students who had not been academically successful (who did not persist at the college) after attending the new student orientation

program. Additionally, students were needed who had persisted at the institution. Three students were selected who had attended the orientation program and three were selected who had not attended the orientation program. For this study, academic success is defined as persisting at the college after one year. Of the students who had attended the orientation program (1,523) 215 students did not persist after the first year of attending the college. Twenty-seven of these students were locatable, however, most had moved and/or their phone number was not in service, reducing the number to 10. Other students' addresses and phone numbers had changed and thus they were not locatable. Specific demographics of the respondents will be reported in Chapter Three.

Data Collection Strategies

The data were collected through interviews, e-mails and the college database. The college database was used to find out which students did not persist at the institution after attending the orientation program. To determine the time, intensity, intimacy and reciprocal nature of particular ties, participants were asked questions (included in Appendix C) designed to explore all aspects of the relationships with individuals and the institution. They were asked whether relationships were new or old, and the degree to which they felt the relationship added to, or detracted from, their lack of academic success or persistence at the college. The script used for the first solicitation is included in Appendix A.

The initial interviews lasted approximately 35-50 minutes. I had follow-up interviews and e-mails with 70 percent of the students. The follow up interviews ranged in length from 20 to 40 minutes, and the follow-up interviews were used to gather

information that was not received in the initial interview. In addition, many of the follow up interviews were conducted by telephone.

During the course of initially contacting the students about the study, 6 of the students preferred to use e-mail as their primary means of communication with me throughout the entire study. The e-mail correspondence averaged a total of 3 replies from each of the participants.

From the college's database it was determined who had attended the orientation program and then did not persist after the first semester or the first year after attending the new student orientation program. The subjects of this study had either dropped out, failed out (made less than favorable grades in classes), or withdrew from the institution.

Data Analysis

The orienting theoretical framework of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) strength of ties served as the lens through which I viewed the data. I used Rubin and Rubin's approach to assess and evaluate the data from the interviews, follow-up interviews and e-mails. Rubin and Rubin (1995) say, "After each interview, and after each cluster of interviews, look over your transcripts to figure out what you should follow up on. Look for themes, ideas, concepts, and events and prepare additional questions on those that address your research concerns" (p. 151). Based on the respondents' interviews, I was able to identify emerging themes supporting the respondents' beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge concerning their reasons for not persisting and identifying their social networks.

Data Representation

Sociograms were also used as a part of the data analysis. Wassermann & Faust (1994) define a sociogram as “a picture that in which people (or more generally, any social units) are represented as points... and relationships among pairs of people are represented by lines” (pp. 11-12). In this study, students were asked to name those people with whom they most closely interacted while attending college. Additionally, emerging themes developed with each cluster of commonalities with the respondents’ answers to the questions of the study. These common themes were visualized via a sociogram. The sociograms (Figures: 1, 2, and 3, located at the end of chapter 3) were drawn showing the respondents reported network ties. The sociograms were then used to determine the social networks present at the college and the identification of the strong and weak ties within this network became clearer.

Research Criteria

An important element of naturalistic research is the importance of the researcher to establish trustworthiness among respondents. This was accomplished in this study by verifying shared constructs (meanings) from the respondents that enabled me to understand their answers to my questions which assisted me into a shared expansion of the subjects’ knowledge (Erlandson, et al, 1993).

In relation to trustworthiness, Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen (1993) believe that “establishing trustworthiness enables a naturalistic study to make a reasonable claim to methodological soundness” (p. 131). They also say, “Trustworthiness is established in naturalistic inquiry by the use of techniques that provide truth value through credibility,

applicability through transferability, consistency through dependability, and neutrality through conformability” (p. 132).

Credibility

Credibility for this study is defined as “need[ing] to be established with the individuals and groups who have supplied data for the inquiry” (Erlandson et al, 1993, p. 30). In essence, credibility was needed to show assurance in the truth of the study’s data, which became evident through a clear correlation between the participants’ perceptions and my interpreting these perceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is a relationship of “compatibility of the constructed realities that exist in the minds of the inquiry’s respondents with those that are attributed to them” (Erlandson et al, 1993, p. 30).

According to Erlandson et al, (1993) the elements needed to satisfy credibility are: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks (pp 30-31). Prolonged engagement was accomplished because of my role as dean of student services, which gave me ample time to “understand daily events in the way persons who are part of that culture interpret them” (Erlandson et al, 1993, p.30). In this setting of closeness, it became a necessity to differentiate my prejudices from the information procured from the students; I always sought to objectively portray what these research subjects revealed to me. I always sought to remain alert to the possibility of bias, and because of this awareness credibility of the research was established.

Triangulation

Typically, triangulation involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). “Perhaps the best way to elicit the various and divergent constructions of reality that exist within the context of a study is to collect information about different events and relationships from different points of view” (p. 31). The alternative ways the data were reviewed and organized in this study included: interviews, follow-up interviews, e-mails, document review and sociograms. “By this method, the researcher seeks out several different types of sources that can provide insights about the same events or relationships” (Erlandson et al., p. 115). Creswell (1994) recommends a comparison of data collected to achieve triangulation and to bring astuteness to a study. I achieved triangulation of data sources through sociograms, individual interviews, document review, and follow-up interviews, which brought astuteness to my study.

In relation to triangulation, peer debriefing or review, according to Creswell (1998), “provides an external check of the research process” and member checks where “the researcher solicits informants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p. 202) were used to accomplish credibility. I utilized the services of an “outside expert” (a retired professional educator) to serve as my peer reviewer during the course of my study. Peer debriefing, according to Lincoln & Guba (1985), was thought to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Credibility was also established in this study through member checks. Member checks are explained by Creswell (1998) when he states, “In member checks, the researcher solicits informants’

views of the findings and interpretations” (p. 202). Member checks are vital so that the respondents can judge accurately the account of what is being written (Creswell, 1998).

Transferability

Transferability, according to Lincoln & Guba (1985), is judged in terms of the extent to which its findings can be applied in other contexts or with other respondents (p. 290). Reiterating Creswell’s recommendation (1998), I used thick, rich description, which “allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in detail the participants or setting under the study” (p. 203). Effective, thick description brings the reader vicariously into the context being described (Erlandson, et. al., 1993, p. 33).

Dependability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability, or as they define it, “consistency,” is “whether the findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects (respondents) in the same (or similar) context” (p. 290). Trackability is another way in which dependability can be measured in naturalistic studies procedures. The trackability of this study was measured throughout the study by the use of a dependability audit. I accomplished this in the manner in which Erlandson, et al, (1993) described by “documentation, (through critical incidents, documents, and interview notes and a running account of the process (... daily journal) (p.34). It was my journal and interview notes that I continually referenced throughout the study to maintain the dependability of how the study was proceeding. “The reflexive

journal supports not only the credibility but also the transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study” (p. 143).

Confirmability

Confirmability, or neutrality, as Lincoln & Guba (1985) described, “How can one establish the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the subjects... and not by the biases... of the inquirer?” (p.290). “The naturalistic researcher does not attempt to ensure that observations are free from contamination by the researcher but rather to trust in the ‘confirmability’ of the data themselves” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 34). To ensure that I did not bias the data, I created an audit trail of all of the data that were collected or created during the course of this study. I worked to ensure that I created an adequate trail so that the trail would aid me “to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the inquiry” (p. 35).

Significance of the Study

Many students are currently enrolling in orientation programs through their colleges; however, many of these same students are not successful in completing their academic program of study and are dropping out of college. Through Granovetter’s strong ties and weak ties network analysis, this study explored the role of the orientation program in student academic success (persistence) by interviewing students who did and did not experience success and did not stay in school.

Theory

Findings from this study should serve to clarify the usefulness of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) strength of ties and network analysis theory in relationship to student success, retention, and persistence in college after attending a new student orientation program. These findings indicated other analyses or another dimension of Granovetter's initial strength of ties and network analysis, which are covered in Chapter V.

Practice

This study should affect practices in higher education new student orientation programs because students and advisors should see the usefulness of an orientation program to their future success in higher education in relation to building ways in which weak ties can aid students in persisting in college. Staff members involved with orientation programs should also benefit from this study by seeing the importance of social networks in the terms of student retention. Others could use the realities revealed from this study to help assess their institution's new student orientation program in relation to the building of weak ties to aid with students' retention.

Research

Retention literature for students who participate in new student orientation programs should be strengthened by this study, and higher education literature dealing with student success should also benefit from this study. Additionally, the knowledge base supporting Granovetter's strength of ties and network analysis framework was validated after the completion of this study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine students' ties and the impact of the social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to enter into weak ties designed to assist students in persisting in college through academic success. Data were collected through interviews with students who were and were not successful academically despite their participation in an orientation program designed to promote success. Additionally, students' were interviewed who were successful that did not participate in the orientation program. Granovetter's (1973; 1983) network analysis served as the lens through which to examine the perceptions, knowledge, and actions of the students involved in the study.

Reporting

Chapter II of this dissertation discusses the literature concerning Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973; 1983), new student orientation, student persistence and academic and social integration. Chapter III presents the characteristics of the respondents and the data collected through the interview processes and e-mail correspondence from the respondents. Data analysis and interpretation of the study's findings comprise Chapter IV. Chapter V includes the summary, implications, conclusions, commentary, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Educators have understood the importance of student retention at universities and colleges for many years, and as a result they have developed new student orientation programs to supply students with the skills necessary to be successful in the educational environment. Many factors influence student attrition and even the most well designed new student orientation program cannot insure academic success for all. This chapter will review literature on new student orientation programs, college persistence and retention, students' lack of academic success, and network analysis.

New Student Orientation Programs

Orientation programs have been devised to assist students as they make the transition to the educational environment and begin the process of higher learning. These programs are designed to help establish the nature of student expectations and initiate the process of student integration into campus life. The most successful orientation programs have been found to raise the confidence of enrolling students and their families; confidence that they have chosen the educational institution that will best prepare them for success (Robinson, et al, 1996). As stated in chapter one, research has found three necessary components of a successful orientation program: a sense of community, more

and better student involvement in the college, and social and academic integration (Sanford, 1969; Astin, 1977; Pace, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987).

Community

Research has consistently shown that student involvement is the key to persistence. Numerous researchers have found (e.g., Astin, 1984; Mallette and Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini and Pascarella, 1977) that the greater the student's involvement in the college's community, the greater the probability that the student will persist to graduation. Research also shows that student involvement is essential to the learning process (e.g., Astin, 1984, 1993; Friedlander, 1980; Ory & Braskamp, 1988; Parker & Schmidt, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). It has been found that the greater the students' integration into the campus community, the greater his/her acquirement of academic knowledge and skills. The most essential campus relationship is that between faculty and student, both inside and outside the classroom. Even among those students who attain their academic goals, students who have greater access to faculty members and their student peers report greater gains in their knowledge and skill development over their college career (Endo & Harpel, 1982). From this information we can ascertain that high levels of student involvement can be an independent indicator of student success. It can also be concluded from the large body of research on the topic of student effort that there is a direct correlation between the quality of student effort and the quantity of student learning (e.g., Kaufman & Creamer, 1991; Ory & Braskamp, 1988; Pace, 1984). Tinto (1997) clarifies this concept when he states, "the more students invest in learning activities, that is, the higher their level of effort, the

more students learn” (p. 600). Learning activities are necessary for students to academically advance in college; however, a specific breakdown of student demographics is only marginally discussed in the literature. Looking at multiple categories of students including male and female, minorities and traditional versus non-traditional students has not been the major focus of research.

Tinto’s (1997) study asserts that classrooms should be viewed as smaller communities of learning, and these communities are located at the center of the broader academic community of the college (Tinto, 1997). Classrooms are instrumental as vehicles that serve as smaller social and academic meeting places or convergences that intersect the various student and faculty communities that comprise the college environment. By being members of a classroom community, students gain access to communities outside of the classroom. Particularly for new students, participation in a classroom community provides entry for subsequent integration into the college’s social and academic communities.

Colleges are comprised of more than just multiple communities; there are also “overlapping and sometimes nested academic and social communities, each influencing the other in important ways” (Tinto, 1997 p. 617). This view of the role of classrooms in student social and academic integration recognizes that classroom experience is central to the college experience and that faculty and curricula are vitally important to student development and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The relationship between faculty and curriculum to students’ persistence is true because faculty-student interaction, both inside and outside the classroom, facilitates the shaping of learning and persistence. This interaction also influences the nature of classroom communities and it influences the

degree and manner in which students become involved in learning in and beyond those classroom and college settings (Astin, 1993).

In relation to the faculty-student interaction in college communities, Robinson et al. (1996) state, “Orientation is a community-building experience for the campus; new students should feel a sense of connection and commitment to the campus after participating in an orientation program” (p. 59). Though orientation is a community-building experience, its effectiveness on different categories of students is unclear. Astin (1993) stated that two essential factors affecting student retention are the degree to which the student communicates with faculty and the way the student communicates with peers; students who share a connection with other students and the campus communities are more likely to persevere to graduation. Sheets and Zakely (1995) postulate that student success is directly related to the extent to which students feel their importance and acceptance into the campus community, and that they are valued for who they are and want to become. Student commitment to the campus community is the direct result of student involvement in the campus community (Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994). Smith & Brackin (1993) confirm that active student involvement in the campus community results in academic perseverance when they claim that “the best orientation experience occurs when there is total campus commitment to the process, resulting from collaborative efforts of students, senior administrators, faculty, and the broad spectrum of Student Affairs and educational support programmers” (p. 35). A campus with total commitment to the orientation process provides a feeling of campus collaboration and commitment to student education and career development manifests a strong sense of the educational institution as an academic environment to new students (Tinto et al., 1994).

Learning Community

In addition to the campus community and its student and faculty demographics, many students feel that participation in a learning community is an integral part of managing the innumerable struggles faced in attending and participating in class. Though these studies about students' participation and sense of belonging in the classroom are useful, there is little mention of how different students react. However, the groups of researched students, which were begun inside the classroom, extended outside of it providing the support that students needed to persist in college regardless of the challenges they faced (Russo, 1995). Learning communities also helped students bridge the academic-social divide that they often face. Frequently, social and academic issues compete, resulting in students feeling that they are torn between the two arenas and forcing them to choose one over the other. When social concerns are given primary importance academic success can be jeopardized, leading to the unfortunate effect of student attrition (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Conversely, high levels of academic involvement and the learning achieved may not be enough to counteract the effects of social isolation, which can also result in students leaving the educational institution (Tinto, 1993). In addition to social isolation, learning communities provide the opportunity for the social and academic worlds to enhance each other, creating a learning environment that is more varied and rewarding than is typical. Tinto (1997) quoted one student as saying, "not only do we learn more, we learn better" (p. 611). Tinto's study showed a clear correlation between students' academic success and student persistence, as he reported that as students participated in a learning community, they felt a great sense of involvement in the campus community as a whole. Their participation assisted

them in achieving academic success that resulted in their perseverance in the college students' environment.

Commitment to the Institution

Just as the overall learning community is important to students, Tinto (1997) asserts that the classroom, as a sub-community, is an integral part of the campus community. In fact, for commuter students, particularly those who have many responsibilities outside the educational institution, the classroom may be the only venue for student/faculty interaction. This is echoed when Tinto states that "it is surprising that the classroom has not played a more central role in current theories of student persistence" (Tinto, 1997, p. 599). It is understandable that different types of classrooms and classroom environments also contribute to student/faculty interaction; however, the existing literature obtained for this study showed no classification of classrooms. Regardless of classroom classification, however, many researchers have come to the conclusion that the more involved students are in the campus community, the more likely they are to persist (Astin, 1984; Mallette and Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977).

Research also shows that involvement influences learning (Astin, 1984, 1993; Friedlander, 1980; Parker & Schmidt, 1982; Ory & Braskamp, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Essentially, the greater students' involvement within the campus community, the greater their accrued knowledge and skill development; high levels of involvement have proven to be an independent predictor of acquisition of learning. Pace (1984), Ory & Braskamp (1988) and Kaufman & Creamer (1991) even conclude that

there is a direct correlation between student effort and academic success, so if students do not feel a sense of community and merely attend classes as a detached individual, they tend to have higher attrition rates (Endo & Harpel, 1982). The students who reported the highest levels of contact within the campus community also demonstrated the highest levels of learning gain over the course of their educational career (Astin, 1993). Again, existing literature discusses students in general, and though this study understands differences in how students learn the objective of this study is not to focus on one category of students.

Better Student Involvement in the College

The classroom is an important part of the student's learning environment, but the integration of students into both the academic and social culture of the institution is paramount to their success and retention (Tinto, 1987). Robinson et al. (1996) even states that "orientation programs facilitate student learning in three general dimensions: transition processes, academic integration, and personal and social integration" (p. 55), so sufficient information about the campus culture is necessary to initiate the transition process. Orientation also enables the new students to meet people in the educational institution community, to begin preparing for career development, and to create realistic expectations in accordance with those of the institution (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993). For students to successfully adapt, it is essential that they be given ample opportunity to learn and develop in academic, personal and social arenas (Astin, 1993).

Orientation means transitioning, and the process of transitioning to a new environment can be extremely stressful. Nearly half of student attrition occurs during the

freshman year, which indicates that the stress of the adjustment to the college environment can affect student persistence (Porter, 1990). The transitional stress may discourage those students who do not feel a commitment to the college, resulting in them leaving the institution (Tinto, 1987).

Students need sufficient information to begin the process of transitioning; however, this information can reduce stress by taking away uncertainty and establishing the necessary life skill of problem solving. It is also essential that students become familiar with the campus and feel comfortable with the educational environment. Therefore, most orientation programs include tours of the campus and an introduction to the educational support services (Mullendore & Abraham, 1993).

In order to become familiar with an educational campus, according to information from the yearly Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey, students often base the selection of an educational institution on the school's academic reputation and the choice of academic majors (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995). Since there is a strong link between academic choice and student retention, there has been a trend during the past decade to focus orientation programs on introducing students to the academic arena (Noel, Saluri & Associates, 1985; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). A high-quality academic advisement department was found to be an essential retention factor (Thomas, 1990). Hence, the most significant role for faculty in an orientation program has been found to provide academic advisement to new students (Frost, 1991; Kramer & Spencer, 1989).

Social and Academic Integration

New student orientation is not completed when classes convene. The whole freshman year is a crucial time to establish a commitment to higher education, with services providing orientation classes, academic improvement programs, and mentoring (White, Hunter, & Barefoot, 1995). It has been established that orientation programs can ease the integration into academic and social circles, heighten student involvement, and intensify the sense of acceptance into the campus community. Increased commitment and involvement result in increased student satisfaction and retention (Astin, 1993; Barefoot & Gardner, 1993; Davis 1992). These programs heighten perseverance because their extremely interactive, small-group format provides students the opportunity to gain peer and faculty support (Fidler, 1991). Freshman orientation programs that provide the most peer and faculty communication and cooperation result in higher retention rates from the crucial first to second year of college (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993). It has been found that involvement is a crucial component in success and retention (Astin, 1993), and is intensified through participation in new student orientation courses. It has been found that a high-quality orientation program can ease students' integration into the campus community and that the absence of an effective program may cause difficulties for entering students (Mullendore & Abraham, 1993). Therefore, it is essential that new student orientation programs address the needs of entering students so that they can be most effective in the students' academic and social success. Because these orientation programs should recognize different students' backgrounds, intentions and needs in order to best serve the students, it is important to note that despite the non-use of student

categorization in this study, recognizing student variety and responding to that variety is essential for success in orientation.

Tinto's 1997 study provides valuable insight into the ways in which the student's experience in the classroom influences persistence, and also how current theories of student persistence might be adapted to "better reflect the educational character of college life" (Tinto, pg. 614). Tinto's 1997 study further suggests a vital correlation between the educational structure of the classroom, student involvement, and the quality of student effort and between the quality of student effort, learning and persistence. This research suggests that these relationships are inclined to be essential for the students and the college environments where involvement is difficult to achieve, such as for commuting and working students and on campuses without residential facilities, particularly those in an urban area.

Student social integration into the educational culture of the college provides the instrument through which both the students' social and academic involvements arise and student effort is employed. The greater the student's academic and social involvement in shared learning experiences with their peers, the more likely they are to become more involved in their own learning and put forth the time and energy needed for them to learn (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo, 1993). The social alliances that those activities furnish function as a vehicle through which academic involvement is begun. Both types of involvement lead to increased quality of effort. Students exert more effort in that form of educational activity that enables them to breach the academic-social divisions in order to concurrently make friends and learn. This enhanced effort leads to increased learning in ways that help insure persistence (Endo and Harpel, 1982; Tinto & Froh, 1992).

Tinto (1997) asserts that the linkage between involvement and learning and between learning and persistence is neither simple nor symmetrical. Regarding the affect of involvement upon learning, one must note that not all involvements lead to learning in the same fashion. It is vital that student involvement be a meaningful and valued part of the classroom experience because “having a voice without being heard is often worse than having no voice at all” (Tinto, 1997 p. 616). Regarding the link between learning and persistence: while learning is usually positively associated with persistence, it is not necessarily true that learning guarantees persistence or that the absence of learning, except for the obvious incidence of academic failure necessitates departure. While it is true that most, if not all, colleges place a greater emphasis on academic involvement, it is also true that both academic and social involvement influence persistence. Even high levels of academic involvement and its subsequent learning may not be enough to enable some students to overcome their feelings of social isolation. Conversely, adequate social integration may not be sufficient to help other students offset their lack of academic involvement. These students persist because of the friendships that have developed, however a total absence of academic involvement necessitates a forced departure through academic failure.

Social Integration

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state that in order to be an effective tool in the socialization of students, orientation “should facilitate academic adjustment and initial social integration, thereby increasing the likelihood of persistence and completion” (p. 419). Students who have realistic social expectations feel more secure and confident.

Students who have prepared for the issues that they are likely to face are better equipped to handle the new situations they encounter. Astin's (1985) student involvement theory stresses that students are more likely to persevere in their pursuit of their degrees when they are integrated into the social and academic life of the college. Students can begin their integration during the orientation program and then increase their involvement as they proceed through their education.

The current literature strongly supports this notion of the importance of social integration into the college. Thomas recently (2000) looked closely at Bean and Tinto as his analytical lens to study the phenomenon of integration and persistence. Thomas analyzed Bean's work as "...among other potential modifiers, the encouragement of close friends may enhance a commitment to the institution" (p. 592). Tinto, in Thomas' view, "postulates a similar relationship, namely that the higher level of social integration the greater the level of commitment to the institution" (p. 592). Social integration is critical for students to acclimate to the new environment of the college (Thomas, 2000).

Academic Integration

Though social integration is an integral part of the college student experience, the integration of entering students into the academic community is an essential part of the new students' academic lives because it fosters their hope and expectation of graduating. Included in that hoped-for graduation are all the hopes and dreams of the students' friends, families and the college itself. Orientation nurtures the beginnings of making those dreams realities as "[t]he most important goal of orientation is to help freshmen succeed academically" (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989, p. 83).

A critical component of successful academic integration has been found to include capable advising, which involves accurate and expedient information to make educated choices about courses and major selection, as well as capable staff assistance (Frost, 1991; Kramer & Spencer, 1989). Unfortunately, the appropriate capabilities of those individuals providing advising to students are a part of the college environment that is often sorely lacking. Boyer's (1987) study found that this area is one of the greatest weaknesses of the college experience. Even though advising is the most common component of orientation programs, it is also one of the weakest. It is vital that orientation programs be developed utilizing the skills of the orientation professionals to help students make a smooth transition into their new academic environments. Advisors should be aware of a student's academic background, the course requirements of the various plans of study and the campus resources available to assist them. It is extremely important that orientation programs make new students aware of the academic requirements of the college. They must also supply information about how to balance the demands of academic, social and personal responsibilities. Supportive professionals who provide advisement based purely on student development theories are of little assistance to a student who fails to meet graduation requirements.

College Persistence and Retention

"Retention of students at colleges and universities has long been a concern for educators" (Murtaugh, Burns & Schuster, 1999, p. 355). The pressing need for examining retention and student persistence efforts is self evident with upwards of 50 percent of the number of first-time entering college students not completing a program of

study (Brawer, 1996; Tinto, 1987). Persistence and retention factors are key issues that many schools have examined (Stewart, Russell, & Wright, 1997). Many colleges and universities are concerned with the completion rates of their students and correlate the importance of the retention of first year students with the importance of examining their institutions' first-year students' experiences (Tinto, 1987).

Persistence

There are many factors that influence student attrition rates. Zwerling (1980, p. 55) states, "A student's past and background, in effect become his or her destiny." Data show students who drop out have "poor academic records, low aspirations, poor student habits, relatively uneducated parents, and come from small towns" (Drew, 1990, p. 54-55). In addition to Zwerling and Drew's findings, Tinto asserts that student attrition is influenced more by what occurs after students enter an educational institution rather than what occurred before (Tinto, 1987). Whatever the cause of student attrition, the situation must be explored and solutions offered.

Related to persistence is the concept of college departures. Not all student departures are voluntary, as involuntary departures constitute approximately 15 percent of student dropouts (Noel, 1986). Most involuntary departures are the result of academic failures, but these departures can also be due to a violation of institutional rules and regulations. The remaining 85 percent of the student dropouts are voluntary departures that leave for many reasons. Though these percentages account for all students, there are alternate percentages for each category of students such as race, age, gender and ethnicity; however, for this study categorizing students is unnecessary in order to

understand students as a whole. Regardless of student categorization, some students enroll in college without intending to complete the prescribed plan of study (Cope, 1978). Drew (1990) lists several other factors for departures such as “financial hardships, lack of maturity, work demands, family obligations and pressures, career indecision, poor academic records and ineffective study skills, low institutional commitment, and poor school support services” (p. 55).

Tinto (1975) established a theoretical model of students who leave an educational institution before graduation. The model illustrates interaction between the student and the academic and social worlds of the institution. This interaction can fortify the students’ aspirations and commitment to the college, while the absence can lead to student attrition.

The student’s family background (socio-economic status, values and aspirations) individual attitudes (gender, racial heritage and capability) and pre-college experiences (academic and social achievements) all influence college accomplishments. These components then correlate and work with: (1) the student’s goal commitments toward grade performance and intellectual development, which results in academic integration reinforcing that goal commitment, and (2) the commitment to the educational institution through peer and faculty interaction, reflected in positive social interaction and reaffirming institutional commitment. Goal and institutional commitments interact to comprise either a decision to leave the institution or to persevere (Tinto, 1975).

In order to determine a student’s goal commitment, the college needs to find out why the student chose the institution and what the student hopes to achieve during his/her tenure on campus (Noel, 1986). It should be noted that not all individuals want to

complete a degree program and graduate from the educational institution. Therefore, it should not be construed as a failure on the part of the institution if the student achieves his/her educational goal and withdraws from the institution before graduation (Drew, 1990). It is not possible for one educational institution to meet the needs of all students (Peters, 1988).

Students' identity and commitment to the campus community must be established. Students' backgrounds and external influences such as culture and job and family commitments should fit well within the institutional environment, not just in the classroom, but also in the social community. Peters asserts that the mission of the student services staff is to provide opportunities for student involvement in activities outside of the classroom. He states, "The evidence is overwhelming that life outside the classroom is crucial to students' happiness" (Peters, 1988, p. 5).

In Tinto's 1987 study, the social system integration is just as important as that of the academic system. He claims that social integration through peer support is directly related to college persistence because students who establish friendships with students with similar backgrounds are less likely to drop out of college. Conversely, students who do not have strong peer bonds have a higher incidence of voluntary withdrawal. Persistence can also be influenced by the social interaction provided by extracurricular activities. While both peer and faculty interactions are important, peer association is the most vital.

Retention

In relation to persistence, Murtaugh, et al. (1999) identified four themes while examining the student retention factor. These prevailing themes include (1) examining pre-college characteristics of first-time entering students (Anonymous, 1997), (2) studying the causes of student drop-outs, with recommendations for interventions to the colleges and universities to reduce the trend (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993), (3) discussion and analysis of programs designed to improve student retention (Boudreau & Kromery, 1994; Reyes, 1997) and (4) exploring the relationship of improved or new teaching techniques and student retention (Dougherty, Bowen, Berger, Rees, Mellon, & Pulliam, 1995; Moore & Miller, 1996).

According to this research, pre-college characteristics can be helpful indicators of student retention, and the effects of this examination have had “direct implications for the recruitment of students” (Murtaugh et al., 1999, p. 356). However, pre-college characteristics are not an adequate indicator of student retention or success. Students are less likely to leave an educational institution when they feel connected to other students and the campus community (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Naretto, 1995). As a result, colleges and universities have created many support programs to build a campus community that increases the students’ feeling of connection to the educational institution. These programs usually focus on first-year students due to the increased tendency of attrition between the freshman and sophomore years.

Connecting retention to student success, Bedford and Durkee (1989) and Hyman (1995) detail specific plans of action that certain educational institutions have implemented to increase student retention. However, the results of these strategies being

used at other colleges and universities have been inconsistent. It is essential that any educational institution's retention plan address the factors that influence retention at that institution. It is also important to note that students remain at an educational institution because of two factors, college commitment and academic achievement.

Students' Lack of Academic Success

Student attrition is often a result of the individual's academic failure, so (Robinson, et al., 1996) it is vital that the student's academic standing be evaluated and remedial sessions be assigned where needed. These sessions establish academic integration and reduce academic failure leading to involuntary dismissal and/or to low self-esteem (Dunphy, 1987). The educational institution's commitment to academic assistance can be achieved through "support services, student-counselor interaction, faculty advisement and monitoring, creating early warning systems such as noting poor attendance, monitoring difficult courses with a completion index of less than 70 percent, and monitoring courses with a withdrawal index of over 15 percent" (Drew, 1990, p. 55). Establishing peer associations and peer counseling are also helpful (Reyes, 1986).

Network Analysis

Many educational institutions have implemented new student orientation programs that, at least on the surface, seem to provide students with the opportunities to become acquainted with the campus community and support systems, thus creating new ties. Some programs offer peer counseling and ample faculty involvement, which in theory would give new students access to a learning community with both academic and

social support (Tinto, 1997). However, student attrition rates remain extremely high between the freshman and sophomore years of college (Brawer, 1996; Tinto, 1987).

Thomas (2000) recently used social networks to understand student integration and persistence. This study presented two very important elements in examining social networks in regards to students' persistence. First, "Those students with a greater proportion of ties outside their peer group perform better academically and are more likely to persist. (p. 609). Secondly, "...those students who possess broader, well connected networks... are able to more easily make connections with others due to the multitude of paths reaching to many parts of the overall network" (p. 609). The significance of this study in relationship to social networks and the analysis of the networks in relationship to student persistence assist in understanding students' needs to create new ties so that the students can persist at the college.

Thomas' analysis closely resembles Granovetter's (1973, 1983) strength of ties and network analysis. Granovetter states that all relationships, or ties, are measurable and can be viewed as either strong or weak. "The strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie. Each of these is somewhat dependent of the other though the set is obviously highly intracorellated" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Granovetter (1973) also generally viewed strong ties as those with family and close friends and he viewed weak ties as those that are less formal. The significance of weak tie formations, according to Granovetter, (1973) are important in developing new ties in which people can learn new things and exchange new information. Thomas (2000) pointed out the importance of a broad well-connected

network to assist students in persisting at an educational institution. This network could be construed as a new set of weak ties, which aids the student in receiving new information. This assimilation of new information encourages growth and provides the new student with an ever-growing learning community, which in turn fosters both academic and social success, increasing student perseverance (Tinto, 1997).

The strong and weak ties of a college community create a network of social interaction. The study of social interaction via a network analysis approach “allows new leverage for answering standard social and behavioral science research questions by giving precise formal definition to aspects of the political, economic, or social structural environment” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 3).

Sociograms

The relationship between student persistence and student orientation programs is nicely illustrated with sociograms. For historical connections to the concept of orientation, persistence and sociograms, Moreno described his 1930’s invention as a sociogram (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), and Moreno’s tool, the sociogram, marked the beginning of sociometry (the forerunner of social network analysis). “A sociogram is a picture in which people (or more generally, any social units) are represented as points in two-dimensional space, and relationships among pairs of people are represented by lines linking the corresponding points” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 12). Moreno stated, “before the advent of sociometry no one knew what the interpersonal structure of a group ‘precisely’ looked like” (p. 12). Visual displays including sociograms continue to be

widely utilized by network analysts (Klovdahl, 1986). Three sociograms were drawn for this study and can be found at the end of chapter III.

Summary

The reasons for student success or attrition are as varied and complex as the students themselves. However, students who feel a deep sense of commitment to the campus community and have a strong support system are more likely to persevere to graduation. Though it is advisable to evaluate the different categories of students, this study seeks to understand overall student perseverance and the effectiveness of orientation programs on all students. So, an effective new student orientation program should provide entering students with the opportunity to explore and become familiar with the campus environment and the student support services. In addition, students should be introduced to peers and faculty, enabling them to create a learning community, which can provide them with the needed academic and social support to be successful.

CHAPTER III

DATA PRESENTATION

Through the lens of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) strength of ties, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine students' social networks in relationship to their academic persistence in order to help the college retain students. In this chapter the characteristics of the respondents are presented, the new student orientation program is described, and the data collected is presented.

Respondents

A total of 16 students participated in the study. The respondents' perspectives were gathered via individual and follow-up interview sessions. Six of the respondents preferred to have contact with me via e-mail. I gave all of the respondents the opportunity to select the form of communication with me that they preferred best (either interviews or e-mails). Some of the data that were collected during this study were converted to sociograms, which showed a visual picture of the students' social networks.

Table 1

Respondents

Respondents:	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity*	First Time Entering Student	First Generation
A	Lori	18	F	Caucasian	Y	Y
B	Sue	19	F	Caucasian	Y	N
C	Tom	19	M	African American	Y	N
D	John	25	M	American Indian	N	N
E	Cari	45	F	Caucasian	Y	N
F	Sara	29	F	Caucasian	N	N
G	Mark	21	M	Caucasian	Y	Y
H	Cody	19	M	Caucasian	Y	Y
I	Jan	32	F	African American	Y	Y
J	Beth	20	F	Hispanic	Y	Y
K	Lisa	28	F	Caucasian	Y	Y
L	Jake	23	M	Caucasian	Y	Y
M	Ron	19	M	Caucasian	Y	Y
N	Trudy	46	F	American Indian	N	Y
O	Gwen	44	F	Caucasian	N	N
P	Kim	19	F	Caucasian	Y	N

The 16 students were selected for this study purposely. Ten students were selected for the study who had attended the new student orientation program within the past two years and had not persisted at the school after their first year at the college. These students were identified for this study by analyzing the data of those students who had completed the orientation program and had not persisted at the college within the first

year after completing orientation. The students did not persist either by: failing, dropping out, or withdrawing. Three additional students were selected who had attended the orientation program and did persist at the school after one year. Another three students were selected who had not attended the orientation program and had also persisted at the school after one year. All six of the respondents who persisted at the school that either did, or did not, attend the orientation program were purposely selected by randomly contacting instructors at the school and asking for students who wished to participate in this study to do so. All 16 of the respondents were given pseudonyms as they are presented in this chapter.

Characteristics of Respondents

The first students' listed are those students' that did not persist at the college. Respondent A, Lori, was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. She was a first-time entering college student and was also a first generation college student. Lori had also been home schooled for most of her K-12 schooling experience. Respondent B, Sue, was a 19-year-old Caucasian female who was also a first-time entering college student. Sue commented early on in the study, "I really enjoyed going to college, I wish I could still be going to school." Respondent C, Tom, was a 19-year old African American male. He too was a first-time entering college student. Tom was trying to play collegiate sports at a regional university and wanted to attend the college for one semester before he transferred. Respondent D, John, was a 25-year-old American Indian male. He had attended another junior college after he had graduated from high school. He had played sports at the other college and dropped out after his first year. He stated, "I think I partied too much at the

other school.” Respondent E, Cari, was a 45-year-old Caucasian female who had attended a vo-tech program for career training. This was the first time for Cari to take college courses as a degree-seeking student. Respondent F, Sara, was a 29-year-old Caucasian female. Sara was a single-mother raising two children. This was her second attempt to attend the college; she had attended before but had only taken 6 hours. When she first attended she had, according to her, “done pretty well, I made a B and a C in the classes that I took.” She said she signed up for the orientation program the second go-around because she thought she needed, “a little more understanding about what to do in my classes.” Respondent G, Mark, was a 21-year-old Caucasian male. He was a first-time entering college student and was very upset that he did not do well at the college. He remarked, “I only wanted to get through this so I could get a good job... I did not study and I did not hang out with people that liked to study.” Respondent H, Cody, was a 19-year-old Caucasian male. He was a first-time entering college student. Respondent I, Jan, was a 32-year-old African American female. She was a first-time entering college student with some technical training with computers. Jan wanted to improve her computer skills thinking it would assist her at her current job. Respondent J, Beth, was a 20-year old Hispanic female. She was a first-time entering college student, a first-generation college student, and a single mother raising two small children. Beth was concerned while she attended the college that the school did not have a day care at the campus of the college. One of the other campus sites of the college did have a day care but Beth thought the drive was too far.

The following respondents all persisted at the school after one year. The first three students presented did not attend the orientation program. Respondent, K, Lisa,

was a 28-year old Caucasian female. She was also a single mother raising twin sons. Lisa thought she had worked several dead end jobs and was hoping that college would help her with her dream of being financially independent. Lisa moved back with her parents after her divorce and they are helping her raise her children while she is going to school. This was Lisa's first time to enter school and she is a first generation college student. Respondent, L, Jake, was a 23-year old Caucasian male. He was also a first time entering college student. Jake spent four years in the Marine Corps and was part of the initial invasion of Iraq, something of which he was quite proud. Jake has worked a number of odd jobs, as he called them, and is currently managing rental properties for his father. The primary reason Jake went to school was to "get a decent job." Respondent, M, Ron, was a 19-year old Caucasian male. Ron was a graduate of a high school very close to the campus and he is a first time entering college student. Ron let me know he was a very social person in high school. He told me, "I tell you this not to sound cocky but to let you know that I was a very social person." Ron let me know of his many achievements in high school, he seemed to like high school very much. When Ron started school he did not go full-time but began part-time so he could also be involved with his church missions program. He did begin full-time studies this past semester and completed the semester with good grades. Ron's choice of a major was probably the most interesting due to the widest range of career goals of any of the respondents. Ron wanted to either be an orthodontist or he wants to customize cars. "I know those are nowhere related but since I was little I wanted to be an orthodontist for some reason but I have a passion for cars and a love to work on them."

The next group of respondents also persisted at the school after one year and did attend the orientation program. Respondent, N, Trudy, was a 46-year old Native American female. Trudy had graduated high school in 1975 and began college in 1983 at a small college in Oklahoma. Trudy's major at the time was nursing, but she has since had a change of mind and has decided she ultimately wants to pursue a bachelor's degree in business. She is currently working on her associate's degree and hopes to transfer to another school this December. Trudy works part-time to aid her family. Respondent, O, Gwen was a 44-year old Caucasian female. Gwen graduated from a small Oklahoma high school in 1977 and began attending the institution also in 1977. Gwen began in the radiography program but after two semesters decided the program was not for her. She began working in the banking industry and then began a business as a home interior consultant. Gwen later became involved in the telecommunications industry in Tulsa and was eventually laid off, which brought her back to school where she is pursuing a marketing degree as she works full-time as an administrative assistant for a local company. According to Gwen, her husband is very proud of her for returning to school. The final respondent to introduce to you was respondent, P, Kim. Kim was a 19-year old Caucasian female and the youngest of three children. Kim graduated from one of the college's largest feeder high schools in 2002 and immediately began at the college. She has worked a number of part-time jobs while in school; child day cares, children's toy and clothing store and she now currently works for a company doing secretarial work.

Respondents B, E, G, K, L, and N all preferred e-mail correspondence with me as their primary means of communication for the study. Additionally, I visited with all of the e-mail participants by phone. Respondents A, C, D, F, H, I, J, O, P, and M all were

interviewed in person by me. The interviews took place in various locations around the community in which the college is located. Several of the participants chose to meet at local coffee shops.

Data Presentation

A detailed description of the data helped convey the full meaning from each perspective identified. “Depth means getting a thoughtful answer based on considerable evidence as well as getting full consideration of a topic from diverse points of view” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 76). The main topics that emerged from the data are presented under the headings of the four tie components mentioned previously in this study: time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services. Additionally, questions regarding the student’s perceptions of the new student orientation program as well as their perceived lack of success are presented. Information received from the respondents concerning each of the four elements in relationship to their lack of persistence and the new student orientation program is presented here.

History of Orientation Program

A brief history of the college’s orientation program is presented here to explain to the reader how the program emerged at the institution. The new student orientation program implemented by the college first began as an idea in the spring semester of 2000. I met with the director of counseling and the student activities director and we discussed how we could upgrade our current orientation program. The student activities director had just attended a national conference on student activities and brought back the idea of

a passport to help participants connect with the conference. The passport idea really captured our attention and we discussed how this could be integrated into our orientation program with the passport being used by the participants to find their way around the campus.

Another element of the orientation program was “golden nuggets” which became common sense things students’ need to know to be successful. These ideas came to me by studying the literature on new student orientation programs and seeing what other schools had initiated into their programs to aid students. Some of the common sense notions were the need for students to read their textbooks, and to attend class. These seemed like things the students should already know but it was interesting the number of programs on orientation that included this in their presentations. A part of the golden nugget theme was to connect students with other new students and to let them know the number of student organizations with which they could become involved. Students were encouraged during the program to meet other new students and to visit with some of the student clubs that had members present to meet with the new student orientation participants.

The final aspect of the program utilized an acronym, START, to aid the students academically with their transition to the college. The acronym stands for: study skills, time management, attitude, repetition, (reviewing their notes until learned) and tabulate. When I first designed START some years ago I wanted the last element of the START program to include a discussion of goals. I did not want the program called “STARG” so I inserted the word tabulate, which means to condense or to list. The students list their set of goals for the semester and for the upcoming academic year and are encouraged to

explain how they can achieve their goals. I have presented this program within the state of Oklahoma as well at regional and national conferences.

The program evolved from the passport to the START program and the two were merged into what the new student orientation team calls the Passport-START program. Additionally, the new student orientation team continually looks at ways the program can be enhanced every semester.

Participants' Responses

Orientation Program

All of the students who participated in the orientation program were asked questions about the orientation that they had attended. I believed the orientation program, designed to assist in the student's success, was not viewed as doing so by 50-percent of the respondents that did not persist. Their responses were mixed, but overall they commented they thought it did not make the impact they thought it would. There were several positive comments about the orientation session that are listed first.

Cari e-mailed her response: "It was enjoyable; however I didn't find any use for the extracurricular things as I only went on campus for books or exams." Sue e-mailed, "Yes it was fun, but I think I had heard most of it before." Beth stated, "The orientation session made me laugh, I liked the tour of the campus." Tom had the most positive comments about the orientation program,

"When I first went into the session I was scared, this was new to me (college).

When I, well I saw (friends) that I went to high school with and I sat by them.

We all thought the presenters were funny. I remember a guy and a girl that just

kept making us laugh. I really didn't think of this, I didn't think of this like it was high school... yeah, I knew I was in college; I felt that I should have listened better at times. The girl kept coming by our row when we would be talking to each other or laughing about jokes that we were kidding about. It (orientation) really was fun though, I remember the rocks... they were talking about reading your books, I didn't do a lot of reading when I went to (high school). Being at the session with my high school buds was fun, it was neat to see them, I hadn't seen them since we graduated.... [T]he orientation overall was very funny... I do remember some of the stuff they presented ...I laughed a lot... it was fun!"

The three respondents that persisted at the institution commented on orientation, Trudy stated, "What I found most beneficial about orientation was the explanation of the school layout and the study tips, having been out of school for such a long time. All of the support facilities, the math lab, communication lab, and the computer lab that are available to students." Kim stated, "The campus tour was most definitely beneficial. I enjoyed interacting with fellow students and meeting some instructors." Gwen commented, "Pointing out how much time I would really need for study time and talking about the value of notes. I was not good at either one in high school but they both proved to be a very valuable tool."

Once again, the majority of the responses concerning the orientation program were not very positive. Mark e-mailed: "I really can't remember anything about it except there were two guys." Jan, who had attended the orientation session in the fall of last year stated,

“Let me say this about the orientation program... it was a lot of hype. The two people were like a couple of cheerleaders. I really didn't see what all the #@*! was about, excuse me but I thought it was a waste of time. I had to be at work and left early after the tour. I thought the program was going to be about what classes you should take and the instructors that you should take... that's what they told me in registration. I really didn't think that the time that I spent in the orientation session was all that great. (Name) kept making comments about school that I really did not think were true. ...well some of them were about how you should do such and such... uh, like sitting on the front row. I thought the program was more for a high school student. I have been out of high school for... about 14 years... this program was for high school students, well, for those out of high school I could... well they probably liked it.”

Sara commented, “Well, I thought it was for younger students, I am 29, most of the people there were 10 years younger than me... I later found out that there was a program for older students, I wish I would have gone to that one.”

John, who had previously attended a junior college, commented,

“Your orientation program was not what I expected, I went to orientation when I went to orientation at (college) it was very different. ...well for one it was a long boring class that took the whole semester. The other baseball players and me kind of... well we skipped it a lot. I thought this program was going to be throughout the semester. When I signed up for it (orientation program) in counseling the lady told me it was going to be throughout the semester. I thought there was some kind of credit... well no I guess there wasn't... I don't remember paying for it... I still have my t-shirt. Overall the program was funny but I don't remember much

of what the guy said... the girl kept saying stuff that I thought the younger students needed, I don't know... well, maybe I... um, well I should have followed some of what was being said. I do remember the bird; I do remember that determination thing... I have thought about it since I withdrew. Maybe I will go back to college..."

Lori stated, "The orientation session didn't really help me, I thought it was more like a comedy show." Cody stated, "The orientation sessions were just OK, I don't know that I really got a lot out of them."

If They Could Change Orientation

Respondents were asked if they could change any part of the orientation session to assist future students what would they recommend. The respondents really made a lot of comments in regards to this question.

Lori was the most vocal in her responses,

"The program needs to be longer... I think that a class throughout the semester would have helped me the most. I wanted to meet new people at orientation, my dad went with me, I was a little embarrassed that he was there... the program should be just for the students. I was home schooled so I wanted, well, I didn't know anybody... meeting new people is really what I needed. When they talked about the clubs I wanted to know more about them... no, I didn't ask questions about them, I was nervous. I saw a few girls that I knew when I went to (name) middle school. I felt they were looking at me funny because my dad was there. If I were to change anything about it... well, I said it, just have the sessions as a

class, that way all the new students would have a chance to be together. I think I would have met some new friends. I really didn't feel that my classes that I took encouraged students to know each other... I am going to try it again (go back to school) but I will probably wait a while. I liked home school but I don't think I had as many friends than when I was going to (name of school). I found out at the orientation session about the Christian group (name), I almost went to one of their meetings but I forgot where they met.”

I probed further about the student organizations that the college had, respondent A further commented, “Yes, I really thought it would have been a good idea to get involved with the Christian group or one of the other clubs on campus, I did want to meet some other students.”

The e-mail respondents in the study e-mailed to me the following answers:

Mark typed: “That’s really not for me to say, I never really thought about what was wrong with your systems or how they could be fixed because all I could ever think about was getting out of there, it was just really suffocating for me.” Cari typed: “Let those who are taking internet classes, know that it will be more enjoyable if they will meet in person every once in a while so that they feel more like a class (family).” Sue looked at the orientation session as something that she enjoyed, but thought it could be improved by more of a focus on the opportunities for students to be more successful. Sue typed the most on this question:

“The program was funny, I did like the way the people presented the material but it was like a comedy show. If I could change the program I would have put a lot more focus on the areas of the campus that we toured. The person in my row that

showed us around, or tried to show us around the campus didn't know where they were going. When we got to where we are supposed to go for help with our English classes I wanted to find out more information. We just went around to different places like we were on a race. I wanted them to slow down, I was trying to keep up with the group and we just went too fast to the different areas. I liked English in high school and I really wanted to spend more time at the lab for writing. I would have liked to go inside the lab and find out what they did in there, we didn't do that. We stayed outside the door and looked through the window. How could we have learned anything about what happened in there? Well, we didn't, I would change the way in which you do the program by having people take students on the tour that know what is actually going on in the areas that we toured. I would have liked to meet the people in the writing area, and be shown what is available for me. We pay a lot of fees at your college, what are those fees for? Shouldn't we be able to learn about what we can do at your college so that we can be successful? I almost did not come back to the orientation session after the tour; I only came back because I left my stuff in there and didn't want to walk in and get my stuff and then leave. If you do really pay attention to what me and the other students that are taking part in your study are saying to you I hope that you will look at this issue on how you did your tours. If you change this so that students can learn about the labs better I think that would be good."

I responded back to respondent B, Sue, and asked her if she ever visited the labs while she was going to her classes, "No, I guess I could have though."

Tom commented the following information about what he would change on the orientation program.

“I think the program overall was very good. I laughed a lot during the program and really think that I got a lot out of it. Maybe the tour could be longer as I really think about it. The tour was kind of short and I really would have liked to see more of the campus to know my way around. We really just sped through the campus. The girl that led our tour from my row was pretty scared and didn’t know what to do. Even though this happened I still liked the program.”

John had similar comments regarding the tour of the orientation program. “The tour could have been a little longer and more organized.” Sara thought the program should be designed for older returning students.

“I thought the program was really for the younger students and the first time they went to college. I felt out of place and my concerns were not that of many of the students that were there. Maybe you could advertise the program that you have for older students when students sign up for this program.”

Cody earlier had stated that he didn’t think he had gotten a lot out of the orientation program. He did have some good suggestions on how to change orientation.

“I think adding a portion and setting up study groups would have been pretty cool. The groups could have been set up with all the new students that were at orientation and the groups could have met weekly or something like that. I think if the students that went through orientation were organized into some sort of study groups this would have helped me a lot.”

Jan had similar comments as those of Sara. “I think the program should be changed to include perspectives of older students coming to college. You could have older students giving their perspectives on what college is like today and what you need to do to be successful. Beth thought the program was fine, though she did think the tour could have been expanded. “The tour was one of the best parts but I think it could have been longer, the campus is really big.”

The three respondents that persisted at the institution commented on what they would change on orientation. Gwen, I thought, had a lot of good comments on this issue, “I would like to see an on going program for the students who attend. Almost like a mentor, personal counselor, or big brother. Someone who would follow up with them or that they could contact. Someone to direct them to the right office, answer questions and provide encouragement now that they have been in school for a while. Someone who can help them to get the full potential that is available to them through the school. You get so much information all at once it would be nice to have someone reinforce it at a later date. It takes awhile to learn where to go for what and if you had a contact person to direct you I think it would be very comforting.”

Trudy also had some very good points she made during her comments,

“I would integrate a section in the orientation explaining how to use the TCC website and Blackboard. I had to figure out how to use it on my own which took time away from studying and other things. I just learned enough to get by and haven’t been able to reap all the benefits that Blackboard has to offer. Also, it

might promote taking more on-line courses which might benefit working adults who otherwise might not be able to take college courses.”

Finally, Kim commented very briefly on this subject, “Have a list of each office and what each office can do for the students.”

Lack of Academic Success or Persistence

When the respondents who did not persist at the institution were asked questions regarding their perceptions of why they were not academically successful or why they did not persist at the college, I found the responses as varied as the respondents themselves. Initially, it appeared that the respondents “blamed” something or someone other than themselves. After the initial questions or e-mail a different perspective came to light from some of the participants.

Cari typed her reason for not being successful, “Just the accidents (Cari commented earlier that she had been involved in an accident that had hindered her success at the college). I did find the History class boring though.” Mark e-mailed,

“I wasn’t interested in school, I could have made good grades in college if I cared, save for my algebra class, the only reason I even tried in high school is because I was bored out of my mind and I couldn’t just sit there with an empty head for seven hours a day. I think that when I go back to college someday that I will try harder. A college degree is very important in getting a better job someday.”

Sue stated,

“I really think I wasn’t successful because I did not apply myself. I know if I ever went back that I would do better. ...yes, I think I might go back sometime. I don’t

know when. If I do go back to school I think that I would not take an Internet class. I think that the Internet class was OK but I liked my English class better. ...I liked it because it is what I am interested in doing. I think that I would like to be a writer someday. If I go back to the school I believe that I would also just take classes that I like and not the boring ones.”

Lori commented that she thought initially she didn't like all of the secularism that was at the school. Probing further she commented what I believe is the real reason she wasn't successful.

“There was just so much that happening at the school and I didn't appreciate all of the worldliness of the school. In one of my classes the instructor constantly talked about sexual innuendos. I really found that annoying. In my History class there was discussions of strippers and I found that really offensive. I also wasn't challenged in any of my classes. Being home schooled I was able to do my assignments and my work at my own pace, in college you have to sit there and listen to all of the crap, I didn't like that. ...Yes, I think that I really didn't get to know anybody at the school, I found out about the (name) club and I probably should have gone to one of their meetings. If I had I think I would have made some new friends.”

Respondent's C, D, I, and J commented similarly to respondent A's initial response, i.e., they first indicated a response as to why they thought they weren't successful but after probing all indicated they wish they had established new contacts, friends, or relationships. I found this aspect of their responses very interesting.

Respondent C, Tom, initially stated the reason that he felt he was not successful was due

to the amount of work that he was doing and did not have time for school. He later commented, “No, I did work a lot but I really didn’t look at school as a place where I fit in, I really didn’t have a lot of friends at the school.” Respondent D, John stated,

“When I went to school before I partied too much. I had a lot of friends but we did do a lot of partying. The baseball team at (school) was close, we did a lot of stuff together, and we didn’t study though. I think if I had made new contacts at the school this time I would have done better. I worked a lot and I think that was a problem too.”

Cody commented, “The computer classes were not what I expected, the instruction was not as educational as I thought it would be... I didn’t have any support at the school; I didn’t have the time to go to the computer lab.” Sara remarked on this topic,

“I believe I just let too much stuff in my life build up to the point that I just couldn’t handle school. I just became so frustrated. I found school very hard and I think I needed someone at the school that I could talk to about my problems. Going to school for the second time I thought I would have done better in my classes but I guess I didn’t. I think I really needed to improve on taking notes. I wasn’t very good at it the first time I went to school and I think the same problem surfaced again when I went back.”

A final comment on this subject by Beth brought out similar comments regarding what I had heard throughout all of the interviews on this subject,

“Finances constantly worried me, I have children and trying to support them and go to school and be a mom and work was too much. I really needed to be able to just go to school. I had to pick up my children after class and take them to the day

care from my mothers and then I had to go to work and afterwards I picked them up and then I really thought I needed to be with them. How can I do school and be a mom, I like school but think that I needed more help. ...I needed to have contacts at the school to help me. If the school had a day care I would have felt more comfortable about my children. I needed people at the school to understand, it is too hard to go to school and be a good mom, I really needed more help than what I had, I didn't know who to ask, I wanted people to help me."

Academic Persistence

The six students who persisted at the institution were asked for their responses as to what they attributed their academic success or persistence in college. Lisa commented, "There are two reasons for my persistence. Most importantly, I have two beautiful boys to raise. When I get overwhelmed, I just think about how I am doing this for them, not just myself." Jake commented, "My military service gave me the tools for which to accomplish this. It taught me to be self-sufficient and to trust my instincts and my abilities." Trudy stated, "I have made many friends while at the college, some of those people have helped me greatly by helping me stay focused and motivated plus helping me over rough spots." Kim commented, "My family is a world of support and I praise and I think I owe most of my motivation toward college to their encouragement." Ron attributed his persistence to high school preparation; "My high school really prepared me well for college. My teachers there did not let me have a blow off senior year, I didn't like that but I now am grateful they didn't let me slack off." Gwen replied; I wanted to be successful this time. My parents paid the first time around and I wanted to show them

it wasn't all a waste. I was focused on subjects that I have a passion for rather than what someone else thought I would be good at. I had instructors that took an interest in me that helped me to grow and develop my skills.”

Emotional Intensity (Relationships)

Respondents in this study identified their primary relationships (those they spent the most of their time with both before college and during college) as their strong tie networks. Interestingly, in this study a common theme emerged where only one of the respondents that did not persist reported a weak tie that was developed in terms of a new relationship while they attended the college. All of the respondents in this study were asked questions about their relationships with others while attending the college. This included relationships formed prior to enrollment and new relationships formed after enrollment at the college.

Beth, a 20-year-old student, responded when asked about the relationships that she had while in college:

“Family, that was about all I had time for. My children just did not like it when mommy was away at school. I really liked school but felt guilty when I was at school and not working or spending time with my family. The people that I knew before going to school were the same people that I hung out with while I was in school. I really did not... no I didn't meet a lot of new people. The students that I met at school were not the people that I normally hang out with.”

Later I asked Beth follow up questions about the relationships that she had while in school. Specifically, I was curious what it would have taken for her to develop new relationships.

“Basically I did not have the time for new people. I just came to school, went to class, went to work and after work went home. I wanted to know my teachers... wanted to get to meet with them but most of them taught part-time and my schedule did not permit me to meet with them.”

Lori on the topic of relationships stated,

“I liked my Internet class because I e-mailed a lot of people from the class. I really did not meet them. I was a little scared about meeting people at the college. I had a lot of my former friends from (name) middle school that went to different schools and not a lot of my friends from church went to this school... my friends went to (a regional college). I wish that I had classes with some people that I knew. I think I should have studied harder, there was a study group in my Biology class but I did not feel like I was a part of their group. I did e-mail some of the students that I had met. We e-mailed each other a lot but I don't feel like I really got to meet them.”

Cody commented on the relationship questions:

“The people in my life before school were my best friend, my girlfriend, my mom, and my little brother. I had some other friends that I would spend time with but not as much as my best friend (name). My girlfriend and I did go out a lot but I worked too... I worked and mostly just went to school, well not all the time. I did miss some school... I think I got so far behind that is why I dropped out. ...I

really did not get to know anyone in my classes. Yeah I played some arcade games with some of the guys but not so that I would call them my friend... they were buddies but I really did not try to meet new people...I kind of did OK in high school but I did not know college would be so hard.”

I asked Cody about whom he wished he could have developed a relationship or relationships with, “I think college is different than high school, I knew my teachers (high school) but did not think the teachers in college cared about me.” Cody further stated that most of his instructors were adjuncts and he thought they were there to just teach, not get to know or “help” students as he reflected.

This adjunct theme emerged from many of the students. Forty-percent of the students responded they thought the adjunct instructor as compared to the full-time instructors were not as available to them to discuss questions or issues they had while outside of class. Jan commented, “I could not find them (instructors) when I needed them. I could e-mail one of my instructors but it would take a while for her to e-mail me back.” She further stated “I wish I had gotten to know my teachers better... really I mean that they would have known me better, I didn’t feel like they were there for the student. I mostly just hung out with my best friend that didn’t go to school.” Sue, Tom and Sara all remarked the only meaningful relationships that they had while they were in school had been with the friends they knew before going to college. Mark, on this question, stated, “I just didn’t meet any new people while at school. The only people that I had a relationship with while at school were my family and my friends at church.” John commented that he really wanted to make some relationships while at college but it seemed like everyone’s schedule was so different that it just didn’t happen. “The only

people that I had a relationship with were my friends that I knew before school.” Cari’s comment on this question focused on her family,

“My family was my primary relationship while I was in school. I really think it would have been nice to meet some people in my classes but I didn’t. I think being my age trying to meet some folks with all of our duties was just too much. I think my family is the most important thing to me, I really did try my best in school but it was just too much for me. I did also do a lot of activities with my friends [that I had before school]. I really think it would have made a difference if I had gotten to meet some new people while I was in school.”

The 6 students who participated in the study and persisted at the institution all had similar comments on the relationships that they had while attending the institution.

Interestingly, in this group all but one of the respondents identified new weak ties that were established while in school. Ron was the only respondent in this group that did not identify a new weak tie. All of the other respondents reported a new weak tie with students. Trudy and Gwen reported a new weak tie relationship with faculty members. Kim, Lisa, Ron, and Gwen all reported on relationships with family members and Gwen was the only respondent that reported on strong relationship ties with those she works with.

Time

Respondents in the study were all asked questions regarding the time they spent with others while attending the college. Emerging themes occurred as to whom the students spent their time with and the interactions with those persons had similar themes

from each of the students that responded. All of the respondents were asked with whom they spent time while attending the college. Similar to the relationship data, the respondents that did not persist reported they spent time primarily with those they had relationships with before starting college.

All of the e-mail respondents commented they spent time with those friends they knew before starting the college. Cari a 45-year old student reported,

“I have a lot of friends... the Internet class I thought was going to be like me e-mailing my Internet friends, this was not the case; we didn’t know each other (the other students) so the students did not e-mail a lot. I spent most of my free time with my grandchildren.”

Sue, a 19-year old student reported, “Yes, I have a lot of friends that I do a lot of stuff with, I spent the most of my time when I wasn’t in class with these friends. We work together at the mall.” These types of statements were reported by all of the e-mail respondents. The interview respondents reported similar statements. John, a 25-year-old student stated:

“Yeah I did spend a lot of time with my friends that didn’t go to college. I guess this is what I did when I went to school before. When I played baseball we spent a lot of time together as a team, both on and off the field. This time when I went to school I really didn’t spend time with the other students... I mostly spent it (time) with my friends that I had before going to school.”

Mark, a 21-year-old student responded, “Yes I spent a lot of time with my family and others at my church. I really didn’t spend any time with anyone at the school.” Lori also commented on her church friends,

“I did see some girls that I went to (name) middle school with, but I really was hoping that some of my friends from (church) were going to be there. I really like my youth group... the classes (at college) were not what I thought they would be... it is not like they were hard, they just seemed worldly... you know, very secular with the students mostly trying to flirt with each other and not pay attention to the teacher.”

Beth responded, “I really just spent all of my spare time with my family and my friends.

No, not friends that I met at school but friends that I had when I was in high school.”

Cody commented, “I spent the most time with my girlfriend.” Jan stated,

“The only people that I really had time for were my friends that I knew before I even started college. With work and all the things I had to do while in school they were the only ones that I really had time for. I don’t know how I could have spent time with any others; there is simply just not enough time in the day for me to do it. When I did have time to spend with my friends it was social time. I do spend a lot of time on the phone with my friend (name). I don’t know if I could have really spent a lot of time with new people, I barely have time to spend with the friends that I have now.”

Two respondents remarked they did spend time with new people they met while at the college. Tom, a 19-year-old student commented:

“In my English class I met a person that went to my high school. We really didn’t know each other in school but we both knew (name). We talked about (name) and we did do some things outside of class together... we went out to lunch

several times and we both liked to read the same type of books. (Name) and I went to the library a few times... she studied more than I did.”

Sara, a 29-year-old student remarked, “I spent a little time with a girl I met in one of my classes, we really didn’t do that much together. I did call her several times about class assignments; I mostly spent time with my friends.”

For the 6 students who persisted at the institution, all of their reporting to me concerning the time they spent with others mirrored the responses that they provided to me in regards to their relationships. No one reported a different perspective on the time that they spent with others regarding this question.

Intimacy

Respondents were asked questions dealing with information they shared and received from others while attending the college. As with the relationship and time questions, it appears that information concerning college was primarily received and shared with the students via their strong tie networks.

Sara commented:

“I mostly got information about the college from my friend (name). (Name) said the best way for me to get by my classes was to go to class... well go to class and to take notes. I had discussed my classes with my counselor but I thought that since this was my second try at school that I would do better. I really thought I would. (Name) always remarked to me when I would say how hard it was (school) that I should not do it (go to school) if I thought I couldn’t handle it. I wanted to do well in school... I think that working and sharing my problems with

others would help me by airing out my frustrations... I only became more frustrated and began to let school slide.”

I asked a follow up question as to if there was anyone at the college she thought she could have shared her concerns with, “No not really, I had spoken to the counselor about my schedule at the start of school but they always appeared too busy (counseling office) and I was too busy also.” Lori responded that she received most of her information about college from the people at her church. “I talked a lot about college with my youth-pastor before going to school and she shared a lot of information with me about how it was when she went to school. I thought this school would be like her college, it wasn’t at all.” Mark e-mailed me that he received most of his information about school from his family, “My mom nor my dad attended college but I found myself asking them questions about it as though they did. I guess I just valued their opinion more than others.” Cari and Cody both received information about college life from close family members that had previously attended. Cari’s received most of her information from her brother and Cody had an uncle with whom he visited about college life and what to expect in college.

Respondents John, Tom, Sue and Jan all stated similar comments in regards to the sharing of and or receiving information about college. Interestingly enough, all four respondents made comments in reference that they received and shared information regarding their attendance at the college primarily with their friends they had before attending college. Beth stated, “I talked primarily about my classes with my mom. My mom never went to college but we are very close.”

Five of the six respondents who persisted reported sharing most of their information and or knowledge about the institution with others they met at the institution,

except Ron, who did not attend the orientation program. Ron commented, “I really didn’t speak to anyone about the school. I honestly spent zero hours with people from college talking to them about anything.” Trudy stated in terms of sharing of information, “(Names, college instructors)... have really had an impact on discussing school in terms of me being academic successful.”

Reciprocal Services

The reciprocal services in this study deal with the mutual benefit that individuals within a relationship receive (Granovetter, 1973). Answers the respondents provided tended to point out they perceived no mutual benefits from others while they attended the college. John commented on this issue:

“... [A]lthough I didn’t think that I would get something immediately while going back to college I did think that I would have gotten some knowledge that would have helped me do my job. My English class... um... I think that I would have gotten some skills that would have helped me with my route. I take orders, well I fill orders and I think that the English class would have helped me to fill out my paperwork. I really didn’t know how to do the assignments from Ms. (name) the way in which she thought I should do them. I tried to work on the assignments with her after class... but... it was too hard to connect with her. ...my second time at going to school I thought would have been easier. I guess I really did not work as hard as I could have... no, I know I didn’t, but I guess I would have liked to have seen quicker the results... Ms. (name) could have explained the assignments better.”

Lori had the following to say on this question.

“I would have thought there would be a benefit from going to college but I really didn’t feel that I received one. I think at times I felt so alone sometimes while at the college. Most of my friends went to another school and I thought I would have a chance to meet some new friends... that would have been a benefit for me... to have just met new people would have been fun.”

Mark e-mailed the following response concerning this question, “I really don’t know if I could say I received a benefit. I guess you could say my family was proud of me... that was kind of a benefit.” Sara commented, “I feel I should have received more than what I got out of my classes. That would have been a benefit if I would have gotten more from my instructors.” Beth stated the following,

“I don’t know if I could say I received anything from the college except for the chance to attend. What I mean is that I don’t know if I really received anything from my classmates or from my teachers other than I had a chance and I didn’t quite make it the way I wanted to. I know I will go back to college someday and I think I will seek out more clarification from my instructors. I think this would be a benefit to me if I did this because I think it would help me the next time that I go to school. I am thinking about going back in about a year or two.”

Jan made a comment that I found interesting, “... benefit, yes, I thought I would benefit from a relationship from my faculty member... I thought they were there for me, but I could never find them in their office.” Respondents C, E, and H all commented they thought they had a benefit or something they characterized as rewarding with their friends, family, or others outside of the college. Respondent C, Tom, stated, “The reward

that I had while going to school was from my mom, she was very happy for me... she said she was proud of me.” Cody, when asked about whom, if anyone, he thought he received a benefit or reward from while attending the college remarked, “My dad, he thought that it was cool that I was going to school.” I probed further to see if he thought he had received any benefits from anyone at the school, teachers, students, etc. “NO, I thought they just wanted a number... I was in a class that had a lot of students in it... well, I really didn’t have a benefit; I just paid my money to go to this college.” Respondent E, Cari, e-mailed her response on this question,

“Benefit or reward from the college, no I think that the only benefit that I received came from the support that I received from the members of my family. My children were so glad that mom was finally going to college. I had sore tendons and it made it hard to type the assignments from the Internet class. I wanted to have a more of a connection with the other students other than e-mail. We should have gone to the school more often to meet so that we could have gotten to know each other. If this had happened I feel we would have benefited from getting to know each other, I wanted to meet new people.”

Sue thought she received a benefit from her boss but did not feel she received a benefit from anyone at the college. Sue e-mailed me her comments on this question.

“I think my boss was pleased that I was taking some classes that were relevant to what I was doing at work. It would have benefited me more if I could have finished the classes that I was taking. I think my boss and even my co-workers would have considered me for a management training position if I could have completed the courses. I don’t know if I felt that I really received a benefit from

anyone from the school while attending my classes. I know that college is something that would benefit me greatly in the future. I know from a work related perspective going back to college would help me for promotions and even a better job.”

The 6 respondents who persisted at the institution had some interesting comments regarding this question that mirrored the statistic regarding relationships. Specifically, the students who stated they had formed new weak ties commented that they received a benefit from the perspectives of the new students they had met. Once again, Ron was the only respondent in this group who did not report a new weak tie development during his time at the institution.

Sociograms

With the data that was collected in this study, three sociograms were drawn to show a visual representation of the responses of the respondents. “A sociogram is a picture in which people (or more generally, any social units) are represented as points in two-dimensional space, and relationships among pairs of people are represented by lines linking the corresponding points” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 12). Moreno stated, “before the advent of sociometry no one knew what the interpersonal structure of a group ‘precisely’ looked like” (p. 12). Visual displays including sociograms continue to be widely utilized by network analysts (Klov Dahl, 1986). See figure’s 1, 2, and 3 at the end of this chapter.

Summary

The data collected from the respondents in the form of their demographics and characteristics, as well as their interview and e-mail responses have been presented in this chapter. The information that was presented in this chapter will serve as a reference point for the analysis of the data with respect to the problem statements of this study in Chapter IV.

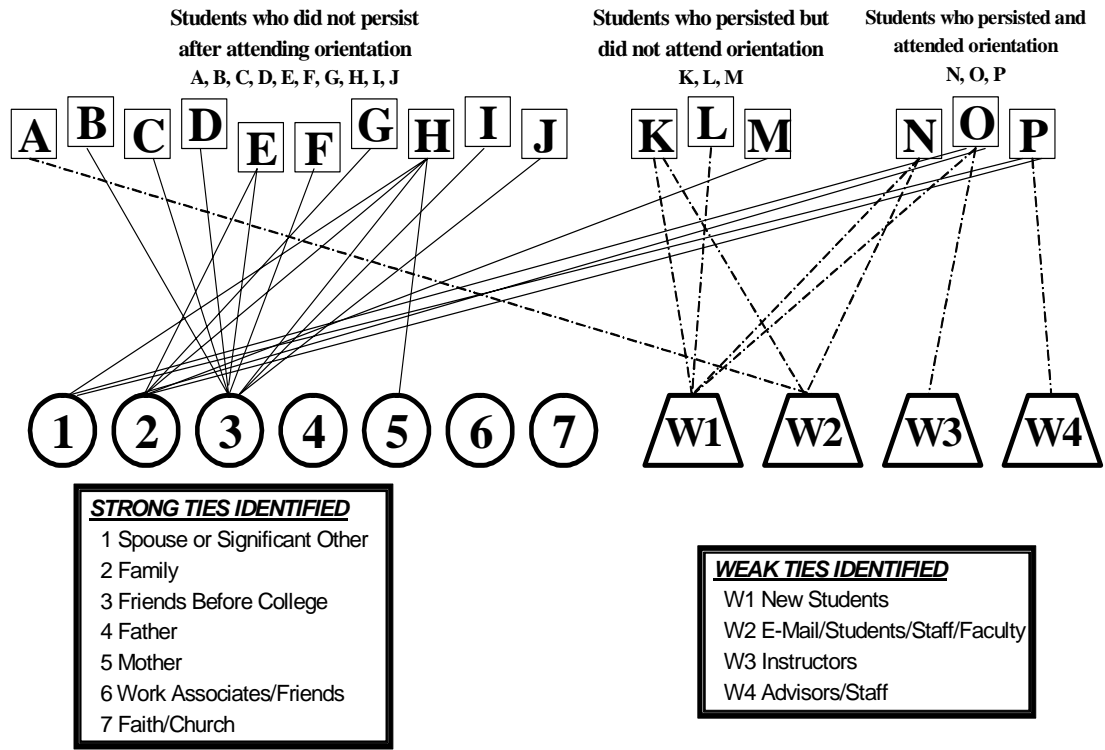


Figure 1
Relationship Ties

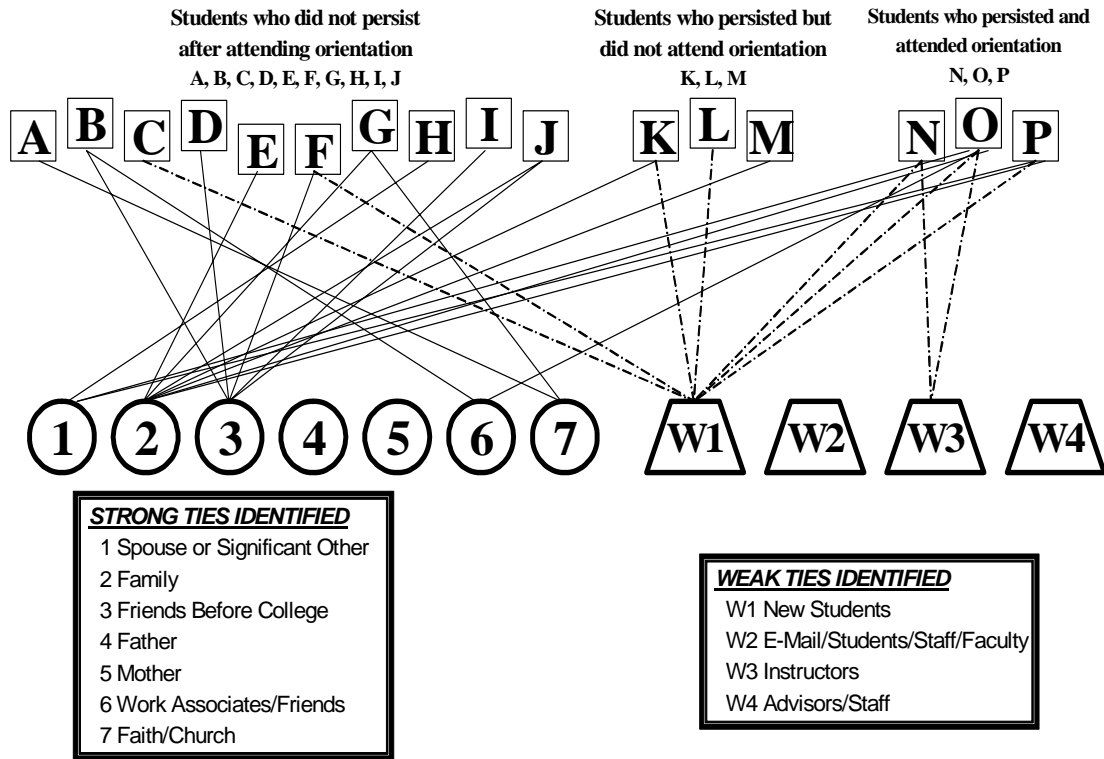


Figure 2
Time Ties

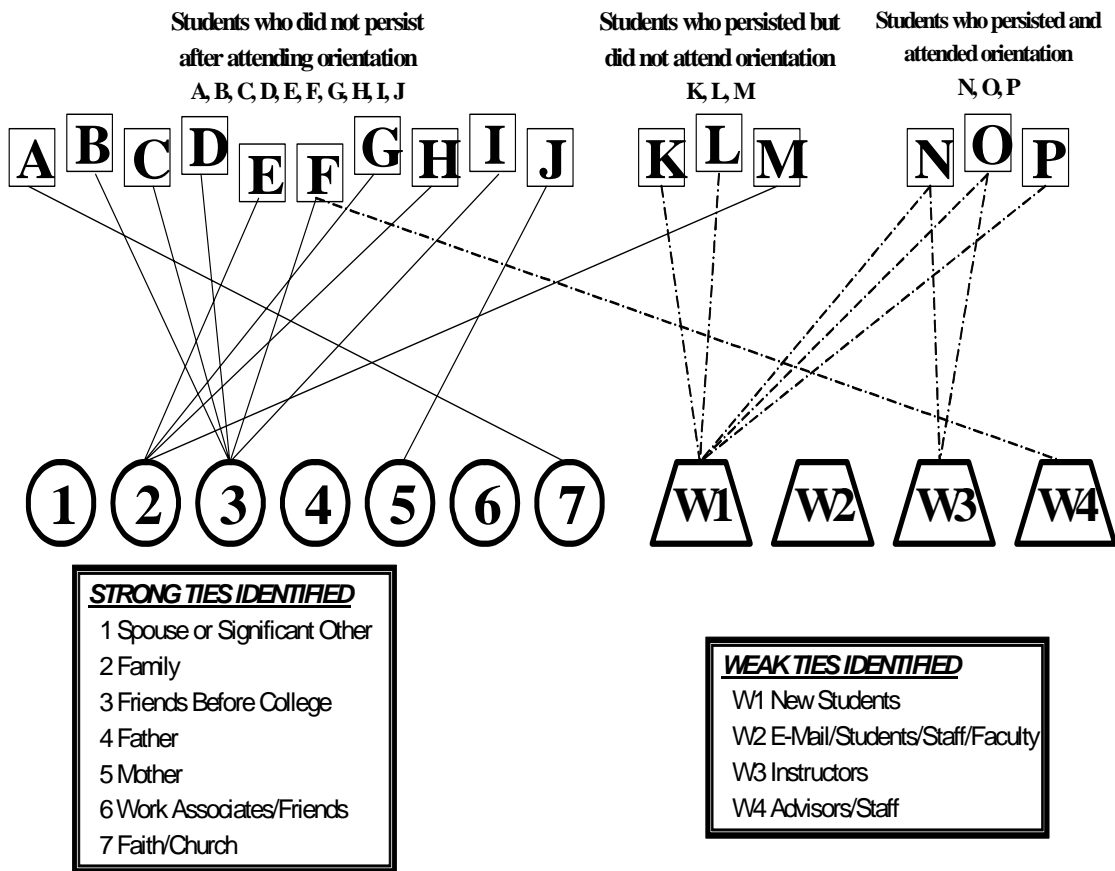


Figure 3
Intimacy Ties

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Through the lens of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) strength of ties, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine students' social networks in relationship to their academic persistence in order to help the college retain students. Analysis of the data collected in this study focused on relationships and tie characteristics as identified by Granovetter (1973) with the ultimate goal of answering the following questions:

1. To what do students credit their academic success or failure?
2. In what way does student persistence relate to Granovetter's strength of ties analysis?
3. What role, if any, did a new student orientation program have in supporting student persistence?
4. How useful is Granovetter's strength of ties in explaining students' lack of academic persistence?

For the purpose of this study the ties of the respondents were analyzed through the lens of Granovetter's (1973) strength of tie analysis. Sixteen students were purposely selected for this study. Ten students were selected who were not academically successful at the institution after attending a newly implemented orientation program. Three students were selected who had attended the orientation program and were academically successful and three students were selected who had been academically successful at the

community college and did not attend the orientation program. The students who were not academically successful after attending the orientation program were selected by analyzing all of the students who had participated in the orientation program but had not persisted at the institution after one year through document review of their academic records. Those who had not persisted were contacted and ten students from this group agreed to participate in the study. The three students, who persisted after attending the orientation program, were selected by visiting several freshman classes and seeking students who were willing to participate in the study. The remaining three students, those who were academically successful after one year at the institution but did not attend the orientation program were also selected by visiting several freshman classes and seeking students for the study who were willing to participate. The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants... that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2003, p.185).

Demographic Data

The respondents in the study were found to represent a very close cross section of the population of the educational institution. Sixty percent of the college's population is female, 62 percent of those interviewed were female. Thirty-seven percent of the college's population is under 21. In this study 50 percent of the students interviewed were under 21. It should be noted that the majority of students that participate in the orientation program are under the age of 21. Thirty-four percent of the school's population is between the ages of 22-31, whereas 25 percent of the interviewed population was in this category. Fifteen percent of the population is between the ages of 32-41 and the interviewed subjects in this area numbered 6 percent. Ten percent of the

school's population is between the ages of 42-51 and for this study 19 percent of the population was within this range.

Race demographics closely resembled the schools ethnic percentages. Seventy-four percent of the school's students are Caucasian while 69 percent of those interviewed were Caucasian. The school reports an African American population of slightly more than 9 percent while the study had 12 percent representation from African Americans. Native Americans comprise 6 percent of the schools population while the study had a 12 percent representation. Finally, the school reports a 3 percent Hispanic population while the study had a 6 percent involvement in this category.

Sociograms

Sociograms were designed to aid in examining the data. Figures 1, 2, and 3, pages 79, 80, and 81 were developed to visually depict the ties that existed between the respondents in this study. The diagrams served as visual maps for the relationships the respondents identified interacting with while attending college, as well as the weak ties that the members reported. In comprising with Gronlund's (1949) findings that a single methodology, sociometric data is limited in its function, elements, which came out from the sociogram depiction were further analyzed through the use of interview and demographic data. The sociogram became a great tool in examining factors of the relationships identified by the interviewees.

Summary

In analyzing the demographic data from the respondents in this study it appears the respondents are relatively representative of the culture that is present at the college. The sociograms additionally aided in the analyzing of the data with the visual depiction of the respondents' strong and weak tie relationships.

Interview and Sociogram Data

Lack of Academic Persistence

The range of responses as to the students who did not persist at the institution varied as to the reasons the interviewees thought they were not academically successful or did not persist at the institution. Respondents Tom, John, Jan, and Beth all made similar comments that they wish they had established new friends or "connected" at the college. In fact, the term connected was used by three of the four respondents and the fourth used the term "fit in."

The majority of the respondents stated they thought they were not successful because they did not apply themselves. Sue's comment sums up what a lot of the respondents articulated, "I really think I wasn't successful because I did not apply myself."

Another theme articulated by 60 percent of the respondents was financial issues, which caused a lot of the students to be concerned with their schooling. Beth's comments on this issue were similar to many of the respondents. "Finances constantly worried me, I have children and trying to support them and go school and be a mom was too much."

Overall, it appeared that the number one and two issues regarding the reasons the interviewees were not academically successful as reported to me, as they did not apply themselves and financial concerns while attending college. Many of the respondents mentioned they would not give up on college and hoped to return to school one day.

Academic Persistence

The six students that were interviewed who academically persisted at the institution also varied greatly in their responses as to what they attributed their persistence. Lisa, Jake, Trudy, and Kim all reported family as a main reason for their academic persistence. Jake also mentioned the military as preparing him for the challenges of school and Trudy also mentioned new students that she had met as being very helpful in her persistence. Ron mentioned the number one thing that aided him in his academic persistence was his high school preparation. Gwen mentioned her instructors as the main reason for her persistence.

Orientation

It appeared the respondents who did not persist at the institution were mixed in their views on the orientation program. Approximately forty percent felt the orientation program was beneficial to them while sixty percent of the interviewees felt the program was not beneficial to them.

Cari's response: "It was enjoyable; however I didn't find any use for the extracurricular things as I only went on campus for books or exams." Sue e-mailed, "Yes it was fun, but I think I had heard most of it before." Beth stated, "The orientation session made me laugh, I liked the tour of the campus."

The negative comments were by far the lengthiest in this category. Mark e-mailed: "I really can't remember anything about it except there were two guys." Jan, who had attended the orientation session in the fall of last year stated, "Let me say this about the orientation program... it was a lot of hype. The two people were like a couple of cheerleaders. I really didn't see what all the #@*! was about, excuse me but I thought it was a waste of time." Sara commented, "Well, I thought it was for younger students, I am 29, most of the people there were 10 years younger than me... I later found out that there was a program for older students, I wish I would have gone to that one." John, who had previously attended a junior college commented, "Your orientation program was not what I expected." Lori stated, "The orientation session didn't really help me, I thought it was more like a comedy show." Cody remarked, "The orientation sessions were just OK, I don't know that I really got a lot out of them."

Overall, it appears the program was not as beneficial to these students that did not persist as the coordinators of the program had hoped it to be. It appears that the other orientation program for older students would have been more appropriate for the older students.

The 3 students that were interviewed for the study, who persisted at the institution, all had very positive comments regarding orientation. Trudy commented, "What I found most beneficial about the orientation... study tips, having been out of school for such a long time... and all of the support facilities for students." Kim commented, "I enjoyed interacting with fellow students and meeting some instructors." Gwen stated, "Pointing out how much time would really need to be allowed for study time and talking about the value of taking notes. I was not very good at either one in high school but they both proved to be a very valuable tool."

Emotional Intensity

Intensity is a factor that deals with the emotions involved in a relationship (Granovetter, 1973) and the degree of commitment on the part of the individuals (students) involved in the tie to maintain the relationship over time (Baker, 1994). For the purpose of this study, respondents were asked questions dealing with the length of the relationship and whether the persons in the relationship were considered friends or acquaintances and whether the relationship changed while the respondent was taking classes at the college.

Of the 10 students interviewed, who did not persist at the institution, only one of the respondents, Lori, reported a weak tie relationship. Lori commented on this, "I did e-mail some of the students that I had met. We e-mailed each other a lot but I don't feel like I really got to meet them."

The strongest tie that the respondents identified was the tie of their friends before college. Seventy percent of those interviewed identified this tie, their friends before college, as one of their most important relationships while in college. John summed it up best when he commented, "the only people that I had a relationship with were my friends that I knew before school."

The second strongest tie reported by the respondents, who did not persist, was their relationship with their families. Forty percent of the respondents reported that this was a very strong tie for them while attending college. Cari commented on this issue,

"My family was my primary relationship while I was in school. I really think it would have been nice to have met some people in my classes but I didn't. I think being my age trying to meet some folks with all of our duties was just too much.

I think my family is the most important thing to me, I really did try my best in school but it was just too much for me. I did also do a lot of activities with my friends [that I had before school]. I really think it would have made a difference if I had gotten to meet some new people while I was in school.”

Beth, on this issue of relationships and family ties, commented,

“Family, that was about all I had time for. My children just did not like it when mommy was away at school. I really liked school but felt guilty when I was at school and not working or spending time with my family. The people that I knew before going to school were the same people that I hung out with while I was in school. I really did not... no I didn't meet a lot of new people. The students that I met at school were not the people that I normally hang out with.”

The three students that were interviewed, who had persisted at the institution and attended the orientation program, all reported new relationships or new weak ties that they developed while at school. Trudy commented,

“Yes, the people that I have met in college have changed my whole perspective of college and what it takes to succeed in college. ...I have become friends with people just like me who have changed careers or are starting college at an older age and we cheer each other on and ACT [Adults in Career Transition, a non-traditional college organization at the campus] helps us to help each other.”

Of the three students who persisted at the institution and did not attend the orientation program, all but one of the respondents reported they did not form new relationships while at the school.

Summary

In terms of emotional intensity, or relationships, the data reveals the relationships the respondents were involved with during school were overwhelmingly with the persons they knew before school. Therefore, it was clear weak ties were not formed by 90 percent of the respondents. One hundred percent of those that persisted at the institution reported forming new weak ties at the institution while only one of the three students that did not attend orientation but persisted at the institution reported not having any new weak ties formed at the institution.

Time

Time involves the frequency and duration of contacts between the respondent and their choice (Granovetter, 1973). The respondents calculated the time factor by stating the hours per day or week that they spent with others. The characteristic of time deals directly with the frequency and duration between the two individuals identified with a tie. For this study the duration of interaction between students and with whom they spend time was used to examine the student's ties while attending the college. This time spent might be identified as study time or recreational time.

Two of the respondents, who did not persist, reported that they did spend time with some new relationships (weak ties) while at the college. Tom remarked, "In my English class I met a person that went to my high school. We really didn't know each other in school but we both knew (name). We talked about (name) and we did do some things outside of class together." Sara also reported a new weak tie with the time that she spent with a student she met in one of her classes. "I spent a little time with a girl I met

in one of my classes; we really didn't do that much together. I did call her several times about class assignments; I mostly spent time with my friends.”

Fifty percent of the respondents, who did not persist, commented that they spent a lot of their time with family; specifically, the respondents gave time perspectives of 10 to 20 hours per week. Beth's response on this subject seemed to be indicative of the group. “I really just spent all of my spare time with my family and my friends. No, not friends that I met at school but friends that I had when I was in high school.” Jan's comment also was reflective of the group's thoughts.

“The only people that I really had time for were my friends that I knew before I even started college. With work and all the things I had to do while in school they were the only ones that I really had time for. I don't know how I could have spent time with any others; there is simply just not enough time in the day for me to do it. When I did have time to spend with my friends it was social time.”

Once again the data reveals that the participants who did not persist at the institution spent the majority of their time with those they had spent time with before starting school. Two of the respondents did report new weak ties but categorized the new time spent with these new persons as casual.

The three students, who persisted at the institution and attended the orientation program, all reported spending time with the new people they met while at the institution. Of the three students who persisted at the institution but did not attend the orientation program, all reported spending time with those they met while at school, except one individual.

Summary

The data in this section is almost statistically reversed. Of those who attended the orientation program but did not persist, eighty percent of them reported spending no time with new people that they might at school. Eighty three percent of the students who persisted at the institution reported spending time with the new people they had met. There does appear to be a correlation with the new ties formed at the institution in terms of those students who did persist compared to those students that did not.

Intimacy

The notion of intimacy deals with philosophical issues, goals and trust (Granovetter, 1973.) Strength of ties in this category was measured by the amount of common knowledge that the network members shared. Networks where members had the same backgrounds and traveled in the same social circles were characterized as strong ties. Networks where members have different backgrounds and travel in different social circles were characterized as weak ties (Baker, 1994).

The data revealed once again that the respondents who did not persist primarily received their information and discussed their college experience with those relationships they had before starting college. Only one of the respondents reported discussing information about the college with a new person, i.e., a weak tie. Sara commented on this issue of a weak tie relationship, "I had spoken to the counselor about my schedule at the start of school but they always appeared too busy."

The majority of the respondents stated they primarily shared information about the college with friends before school. Fifty percent of the respondents identified friends before college as a primary source for sharing college information.

The data represents that the respondents' information sharing was once again primarily with those whom they had known before school. In terms of intimacy, therefore, participants stated their selections were made based upon a similar philosophy and shared knowledge. Of the students who persisted at the institution, all but one of the students (one of the students who did not attend the orientation program, Ron) reported sharing of college information and knowledge about the college or classes.

Summary

Consistent with the two previous analyses; relationships, and time spent in those relationships, 90 percent of the students who did not persist at the institution reported they did not share college information or knowledge with those at the institution while all but one of the respondents who persisted at the institution (a student who did not attend the orientation program, Ron) reported he/she shared information about the college or knowledge about the college with the new relationships (weak ties) that he/she formed while at the institution. The data seem to be consistent with the notion that new weak tie formations have been present with the students who persisted at the institution compared to the students who have not persisted at the institution.

Reciprocity

A reciprocal service refers to the mutual benefit that individuals within a relationship receive (Granovetter, 1973). According to Forsyth and Hoy (1978), a network where the interaction between members was rewarding was characterized as likely to continue. For the purposes of this study a reward could be a favor or simply advice for the student seeking it and the reciprocity on the part of the person giving advice could be simply self-satisfaction, a new friend, or possibly a professional prodigy.

Mark, a student who did not persist, responded to this question, “I really don’t know if I could say I received a benefit. I guess you could say my family was proud of me... that was kind of a benefit.” Sara’s comments were similar, “I feel I should have received more than what I got out of my classes. That would have been a benefit if I would have gotten more from my instructors.” Beth’s comments were similar to Sara’s and Mark’s, “I don’t know if I could say I received anything from the college except for the chance to attend.”

Jan made a comment that I found interesting, “... benefit, yes, I thought I would benefit from a relationship from my faculty member... I thought they were there for me, but I could never find them in their office.” Respondents C, E, and H all commented they thought they had a benefit or something they characterized as rewarding with their friends, family, or others outside of the college.

Five of the 6 students who persisted at the institution all commented on sharing of information with the new relationships they formed at the college. Once again, only Ron, who did not attend the orientation program, reported not sharing any information or knowledge about the college with new relationships at the college.

Summary

In summarizing the responses of the interviewees who did not persist at the institution, it was clear they all felt they did not receive a benefit or any type of reciprocal service from anyone at the college. Many of the respondents did feel they thought they should have received a benefit but felt they did not receive one from the college. Only 1 of the respondents that was interviewed, who persisted at the institution, reported not having any type of reciprocity in terms of receiving any type of benefit from anyone at the institution.

Other Realities Revealed

Several additional themes came out during the interview process, but only one theme emerged that captured fifty percent of the interviewees (those who did not persist) during the interview process. The other themes were individual in nature and did not share a common interest of concern with the other respondents. Fifty percent of the respondents who did not persist articulated a concern regarding the faculty of the college, which warranted a description of what the respondents reported.

It appeared the respondents were not pleased with their inability to contact faculty at the college. Jan commented on this issue, "I could not find them (instructors) when I needed them. I could e-mail one of my instructors but it would take a while for her to e-mail me back." Cody commented that he thought the adjuncts were not "helpful" enough to him. Sara felt, "That would have been a benefit if I would have gotten more from my instructors." Jan further commented on the subject, "I thought they were there for me, but I could never find them in their office."

It appears after analyzing the data that fifty percent of the interviewees who did not persist felt they should have had more contact with their instructors. Most also thought this additional contact would have aided them while they were at the college.

Of the respondents who did persist only individual themes emerged from the data. No single individual reality was echoed by any two of the respondents.

Summary

In line with the literature reviewed in Chapter II regarding the use of Network Analysis (Granovetter 1973; 1983); the data reviewed in Chapter III revealed that while the participants in the new student orientation program were introduced to new settings and new ties (weak ties), their previous strong ties remained dominant. While those students that were interviewed who had persisted at the institution and had attended orientation reported all reported new weak tie formations. Of the respondents who persisted at the institution and did not attend the orientation program, only one of the respondents reported no new weak tie formations.

Data analysis further revealed that in all areas of Granovetter's (1973) network analysis- emotional intensity, time, intimacy, and reciprocity- the respondents who did not persist at the institution overwhelmingly showed a lack of new weak tie relationships. Of the respondents who persisted at the institution, only one of the respondents did not identify a new weak tie relationship. The sociograms developed for this study depict this anomaly.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND COMMENTARY

Colleges and universities are designing and implementing new student orientation programs to aid in students' retention in college. A community college in a mid-western state implemented a new student orientation program that examined the students who did not persist after participating in the program. Additionally, 3 students were interviewed who attended the orientation program and did persist. Three students were also interviewed who persisted at the institution but did not attend the orientation program. This chapter includes a summary of the study, conclusions, recommendations, implications, and commentary learned from the data collected in this study.

Summary of the Study

This study examined students' ties and the impact of the social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to enter into weak ties designed to assist students in persisting in college through academic success. Data were collected through interviews with students who were not successful academically despite their participation in an orientation program designed to promote success. Additionally, 6 students were interviewed who persisted at the institution, three had attended the orientation program

and three had not. Granovetter's (1973; 1983) network analysis served as the lens through which to examine the perceptions, knowledge, and actions of the students involved in the study to aid the college in its retention efforts.

Purpose

Through the lens of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) strength of ties, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine students' social networks in relationship to their academic persistence in order to help the college retain students. The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what do students credit their academic success or failure?
2. In what way does student persistence relate to Granovetter's strength of ties analysis?
3. What role, if any, did a new student orientation program have in supporting student persistence?
4. How useful is Granovetter's strength of ties in explaining students' lack of academic persistence?

To accomplish these purposes, several kinds of data were needed.

Data Needs and Sources

The data that were needed for this study were data that described the social networks of students' strong and weak ties and the impact of these network associations on the students' retention efforts. Specifically, data were needed to know the relationships students developed upon entry into higher education and their interpretation or sense making (Weick, 1993) of the impact of those relationships. The characteristics

of time, intensity, intimacy and reciprocity in perspective to those relationships will be sought as well. The people needed for this study were the students who had not been academically successful (who did not persist at the college) after attending the new student orientation program as well as three students who did persist after attending the orientation program. Additionally, three students were needed for the study who had persisted at the institution but did not attend the orientation program.

Data Collection

The data collection strategies used to conduct this study were initial and follow-up open-ended interviews, e-mails and review of the database of the college. To determine the time, intensity, intimacy and reciprocal nature of particular ties, participants were asked questions (included in Appendix A) designed to explore all aspects of their relationships with individuals and the institution. They were asked whether this relationship was a new relationship or an old relationship, and the degree to which they felt the relationship added to or detracted from their lack of academic success or persistence at the college.

Data Analysis

The theoretical framework of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) strength of ties served as the lens through which I viewed the data. The data were assessed and evaluated from the data obtained from each of the interviews, follow-up interviews and e-mails by following Rubin and Rubin's (1995) advice. "After each interview, and after each cluster of interviews, look over your transcripts to figure out what you should follow up on. Look for themes, ideas, concepts, and events and prepare additional questions on those

that address your research concerns” (p. 151). Based on the interviews I was able to identify emerging themes supporting their beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge concerning their reasons for not persisting and identifying their social networks.

Summary of Findings

To maintain consistency with the purpose of the study, major findings will be examined in the following manner:

1. A description of the ties (Granovetter, 1973) that the respondents identified;
2. To what do students credit their academic success or failure?
3. In what way does student persistence relate to Granovetter’s strength of ties analysis?
4. What role, if any, did a new student orientation program have in supporting student persistence?
5. How useful is Granovetter’s strength of ties in explaining students’ lack of academic persistence?
6. The identification of areas for further study.

Description of Ties

The definitions used by Granovetter (1973) which stated that a tie comprised of the four factors of emotional intensity, time, intimacy, and reciprocity was discovered to be very valuable in describing the tie characteristics among the respondents. Using these definitions, data were collected and analyzed that resulted in a useful analysis.

Emotional Intensity

Intensity is a factor that deals with the emotions involved in a relationship, (Granovetter, 1973) and the degree of commitment on the part of the individuals (students) involved in the tie to maintain the relationship over time (Baker, 1994). For the purpose of this study respondents were asked questions dealing with the length of the relationship and whether the person in the relationship was considered a friend or acquaintance and whether the relationship changed while the respondent was taking classes at the college.

Overwhelmingly, the respondents who did not persist reported in this study that their emotional intensity ties (relationships) were with those before they started school. Only one of the respondents reported a new weak tie. Of the students who did persist, all of the students who went through the orientation program reported new relationship ties (weak ties). All but one of the students who persisted but did not attend the orientation program reported new relationship ties. The data clearly show the respondents who did not persist did not create new ties and all but one of the respondents who did persist created new ties.

Time

Time involves the frequency and duration of contacts between the respondent and their choice (Granovetter, 1973). The characteristic of time deals directly with the frequency and duration between the two individuals identified with a tie. For this study, the duration of interaction between students and with whom they spend time was used to

examine the student's ties while attending the college. This time spent might be identified as study time or recreational time.

Once again the data revealed the participants who did not persist at the institution spent the majority of their time with those they had spent time with before starting school. Two of the respondents did report new weak ties but categorized the new time spent with these new persons as casual. In those that persisted at the institution, all but one of the respondents reported spending a lot of time with the new ties that they had met while attending the institution.

Intimacy

The notion of intimacy deals with philosophical issues, goals and trust (Granovetter, 1973.) Strength of ties in this category was measured by the amount of common knowledge that the network members shared. Networks where members had the same backgrounds and traveled in the same social circles were characterized as strong ties. Networks where members have different backgrounds and travel in different social circles were characterized as weak ties (Baker, 1994).

The data revealed once again that the respondents who did not persist at the institution primarily received information and talked about college experience with those they had relationships before starting college. Only one of the respondents reported discussing information about the college with a new person, i.e., a weak tie. Of the six respondents who persisted at the institution, all but one of the respondents reported new weak tie formations regarding the intimacy issue.

Reciprocity

A reciprocal service refers to the mutual benefit that individuals within a relationship receive (Granovetter, 1973). According to Forsyth and Hoy (1978), a network where the interaction between members was rewarding was characterized as likely to continue. For the purposes of this study a reward could be a favor or simply advice for the student seeking it and the reciprocity on the part of the person giving advice could be simply self-satisfaction, a new friend, or possibly a professional prodigy.

The reciprocity of the students who did not persist once again showed their dependence on their strong tie network. Only one reciprocal service was reported by one of the respondents of this study who did not persist. The data in this area for the students who persisted at the institution are in total contrast of the data represented for those who did not persist. All but one of the respondents reported a mutual benefit from a new weak tie formation at the institution.

Academic Failure or Persistence

Of the ten students who did not persist at the institution, it appeared that overall the number one and two issues regarding the reasons the interviewees were not academically successful as they reported to me were (1) they did not apply themselves and (2) financial concerns while attending college. Many of the respondents mentioned they would not give up on college and hoped to one day return to school. The six students that were interviewed who academically persisted at the institution varied greatly in their responses as to what they attributed their persistence. Four of the respondents reported family as being a key to their persistence while one of the other

respondents named his high school preparation and yet another student listed her college instructors as her main reason for persistence at the institution.

There did not appear to be a significant link within either of the two groups, those that did not persist as compared to those that did not in terms of any relative outcome that could be assessed for this study's purpose. It looked as though not enough preparation for the group that did not persist as compared to the group who did persist primarily by the persistence group labeling their family as their key reason of persistence.

Network Analysis

Network analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) proved to be a useful tool for identifying and describing the ties that existed within the students of this study in terms of their persistence at the institution. Throughout the analysis it became apparent that the students who did not persist did not develop new weak ties, which would have aided their transition into the college (Thomas, 2000) and supported Granovetter's analysis of new weak tie formations that would have assisted the students in learning new things (Granovetter, 1973). Overwhelmingly, the students who did persist reported new weak tie formations at the institution. The finding of the students who did not persist and did not develop new weak ties was an overwhelming theme within this study. In all four-tie analyses, time, emotional intensity, reciprocal services, and intimacy all the data overwhelmingly showed the students did not develop new weak ties.

The lack of new weak tie associations was also visually depicted through the use of sociograms to aid in a visual depiction of the network analysis of the respondents. The sociograms clearly showed the strong ties (depicted by bold lines) and weak ties (depicted by dotted lines) of the respondent's networks to further aid the reader in

visualizing the associations of the participants. The sociograms clearly show the students who did not persist did not form new ties as contrasted with the overwhelming majority of the students who did persist.

Orientation Program

The role the orientation program played in the study, according to the 10 students who did not persist, was not a real factor according to the students. Of the 3 students that were interviewed who did participate in the orientation program, all of them thought the orientation program had a major impact on them. I am hesitant to draw any conclusion on the fact alone of the 3 students who persisted in terms of only looking at the orientation program. Clearly, 3 students persisted as part of this study who did not even attend the orientation program. It should be noted that all of the three students who persisted at the institution and took part in the orientation program noted the orientation program as having a major impact on their “connecting” with the institution and I think that one can draw that it did play a part with their new tie developments. Of the students who persisted and did not attend orientation, only one student reported no new tie developments while at the institution. It appears that tie development was a factor for the overwhelming majority of those who persisted at the institution compared to those who did not, and it appears that orientation, while it might have assisted in a small manner, was not the overall most contributable factor for the reasons the respondents gave for their persistence at the institution.

Recommendations and Areas for Further Study

The students that chose to use e-mails for the study made me think of the large number of Internet courses that students are taking. Many institutions have implemented Internet classes; I believe this warrants further research based on two issues. First, is the level of instruction of the same quality as that of a traditional classroom? Secondly, Internet services of student services delivery systems needs to be explored further. This would include research into effective student services via the internet, e.g., on-line orientation, on-line verification of whom is taking the class, on-line academic advisement, on-line financial services, and on line-tutoring.

I also think research regarding community colleges needs to continue based on the definitional term of success. Who defines success for community colleges? It seems success today is defined in terms of how many students the community college graduates. Or is success gleaned from the student's perspective? Graduation is a success for many students but can success also be the completion of a single class or a series of classes for students? Community colleges need to be evaluated not just on the statistical assessments that are so common today with accreditation bodies, but also on qualitative data that can be viewed for it's relation to success.

I believe further research on students and their learning style needs to be analyzed in terms of a new student orientation program. I would have liked to have a learning style element as a part of the orientation program but the limited time that was allowed for the orientation program prohibited this examination. I believe if students and faculty of community colleges better understand the dynamics of the various ways in which students learn, more students can be and will be successful in college. Specifically,

various instruments are available to determine the learning style of people; ATLAS is one of these tools. This tool or a similar instrument could be implemented in an orientation program and the effectiveness of students learning the best way in which they learn could be evaluated. Additionally, faculty members probably need a better understanding of students' learning styles to better reach all students and not just teach students in the style(s) with which they are most comfortable. The concept of faculty members examining how best to teach warrants further research.

Another area of study would be to examine how new weak ties could be established with respondents to aid in their connection to the college. This information could be useful in exploring ways to assist students with their persistence in colleges.

Commentary

When I first began this study, I truly thought the new student orientation program that I helped to develop for the college would make a difference with all of the students who attended the program. I know this was a very idealistic view; clearly the view was too idealistic.

The most difficult part of this study (by far) was just getting the subjects to participate in the study. All of the participants who did not persist were former students of the institution and they currently did not have any direct connection to the college. I spent countless hours just trying to track down students who had not been academically successful (or persisted) and who had participated in the orientation program. It was amazing to me how many times the students had either moved or their telephone number had changed. For a while I thought my duties were very similar to a private investigator or skip-tracer in just trying to find individuals who would participate in this study. After

the students were located and had agreed to participate in the study the task was then to set up a time to meet with them. This task proved to be very difficult in working around the respondents' work schedules and family commitments. The respondents for the most part (once I found them) really opened up with me and I believe I learned a lot from their experiences while they attended the college.

It is my strong opinion that colleges and universities need to carefully analyze their new student orientation programs. The study overwhelmingly showed that the participants who did not persist did not establish new weak ties. I believe the information gleaned from this study will assist the orientation team at my former institution examine how we can assist the participants with the establishment of new ties. I know I have used this information at the new institution where I am now employed in aiding new students by trying to assist them with new tie developments. Before leaving my former institution, I worked with the new student orientation team and designed a new element of the program with the students participating in several follow-up sessions throughout the semester to find out how the new students are doing and once again allow them to get to know other new students. Hopefully, the efforts of the new student orientation team will continue to examine how to best serve first-time entering students.

With the large numbers of students not persisting in their collegiate setting, it is imperative that focused retention efforts be put in place to help turn this trend. Another factor that needs to be closely examined is the possibility of mandatory, new student orientation for first time beginning students or at least for students who are viewed to be at academic risk. This might include students who enroll in developmental classes. It should be noted again that the orientation program at the college examined is not required, but it is strongly encouraged for first-time entering students.

Interestingly, a committee set up by an academic administrator at the college examined ways to improve student retention. One of the ideas the committee came up with was a mandatory new student orientation program. This idea was presented almost two years ago. To date the program has not been instituted. The main reason for not implementing the new program has been that the school does not want to impede the enrollment process. I think this notion needs to be re-examined. If we truly want first-time students to persist at institutions, this school and others we need to take another look at the current practices and see what is best for students.

Conclusions

Data obtained from this study should impact theory, add to the knowledge base of education through research, and lastly, influence practice (Hoy & Miskel, 1991). In this next section I will examine how this study met each of these criteria.

Theory

Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) showed its usefulness in describing and identifying ties (Granovetter, 1973) that were present among the research group. The ties of the respondents were classified as either strong or weak but shared the common elements of some amount of time, reciprocity, intimacy, and intensity. The strength of ties analysis of the respondents were examined and the similarities showed overwhelmingly the lack of new weak tie formations of the respondents who did not persist at the institution as compared to the students who did persist. The network analysis theories aided this study greatly by validating Granovetter's earlier work and

were shown to be very beneficial to this study by using Granovetter's analysis regarding students' ties in relationship to persistence at an institution of higher education.

Research

Research using Network Analysis was examined in regards to the ties of the respondents in this study who did not academically persist in a college setting after the first semester compared to the students who did persist. This study added to the knowledge base of Network Analysis by providing an analysis of students and their lack of persistence using a social network analysis perspective. Further research in this area might include a quantitative analysis using the same Network Analysis and examination of the students' social networks.

Practice

In viewing the data from the respondents in this study who did not persist, it is apparent they did not establish new weak ties in contrast to the overwhelming majority of the students who persisted at the institution. In the future, colleges designing an orientation program could review this information and determine if they could strengthen the new tie formations of beginning students in an effort to better connect them with the institution. Data provided by the respondents who did not persist show a clear attachment to their strong tie network while attending the institution. It became apparent throughout the research of Network Analysis that the establishment of new ties by the respondents could have strengthened their chances of persistence at the college (Thomas, 2000) as evidenced by the students who did persist.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

ORAL SOLICITATION

College Persistence: Social Networks and New Student Orientation Programs

IRB#: ED 0329 & ED 04105

Script for First Contact

My name is Erik Zoellner and I am the dean of student services at Tulsa Community Colleges (TCC) Southeast Campus (SEC). I am also a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University and am conducting a study on students who have and have not participated in our new student orientation program and were or were not academically successful while attending the college. I would like to interview you regarding the time you spent at the college, the relationships that you developed while at the college, and the benefits that you feel that you did or did not receive while attending the college. I anticipate the interview will take about forty-five minutes.

Let me assure you of several things. First, I will never use your name in any manner associated with this study. Second, the information that you share with me will be held in the strictest confidence.

The goal of this research project is to produce a research report and articles for scholarly journals on the issue of college persistence, students' social networks and their relationships with new student orientation programs. It is likely that I will need to do a brief follow up interview, however your participation in this study will always remain at your discretion and you can withdraw your consent at any time.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would be willing to visit with me about these issues.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent of Human Subjects

I, _____, authorize Erik Zoellner to interview me as part of his research into the impact of social networks on the knowledge of student academic success. This is done as part of an investigation exploring new student orientation programs.

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary;
- There is no penalty for refusal to participate;
- I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in the project at any time without penalty;
- My participation in this study will consist of granting an **individual interview** or e-mail responses to Erik Zoellner. Typically these interviews last 45 minutes to one hour, but individuals with greater involvement in the implementation process may be asked to stay longer or to consent to additional interviews.
- If I permit it, the interview will be tape-recorded.
- My name will not appear on the tape or transcript of the interview.
- I will not be identified by name as an interviewee in any description or report of this research. However, portions of my interview may be presented as quotations;
- If I have a unique perspective or unique access to information about the implementation process, people familiar with the process in my school may be able to connect me with my words. I recognize the need to protect myself from this possibility if I consider it necessary.

If I have questions, I may contact any of the following:

Erik Zoellner, ezoellner@tulsacc.edu, 12104 S. 85th E. Ave, Bixby, Oklahoma 74008. Phone 918-369-3663.

Dr. Carol Olson, colson@okstate.edu, IRB Chair, Oklahoma State University, 415 Whitehurst, Stillwater, OK 74078. Phone: 405-744-1676.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Signed: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

I personally explained all elements of this form to the participant before he/she signed it.

Signed: _____
Erik Zoellner

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to go to college?
2. What was (is) your proposed college major?
3. (If applicable) Why did you leave college?
4. To what do you attribute your lack of academic success (or your academic success)?
5. How did (have) your relationships with people change (d) while at college?
6. Please describe the social relationships you had (have) while attending college.
7. (In relationship to question #6:) How much time did you spend in these relationships?
8. Did (or have) the new people that you met while in college give you a new perspective of your college experience? Of your academic success? Of your skills or talents?
9. What or who encouraged you in your studies? Peers, family, faculty?
10. Did you (or are you) receive (ing) any type of benefit from anyone while attending college?
11. (If) You attended the orientation program; which part of the program (if any) did you find most beneficial?
12. If you could develop a segment for the new student orientation program, what would you develop to assist new students participating in orientation?
13. What else would you like to tell me about this past year at the college?
14. What should I have asked you that I did not?

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE OF DATA

Note: Personal data has been altered to protect the identity of the subject.

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study and for signing the IRB Consent Form.

Please be as descriptive as you can when you answer the questions (just reply below the questions and use all the space that you need). Thank you in advance for returning this survey to me by this Sunday.

1. Please describe to me some information about yourself (where did you go to high school and what did you do from high school to beginning college)?

I grew up in (Name), OK and graduated from high school there in 1975. I was going to take off a year, then go to college. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to go after that year and didn't return to college until 1983. My plan was a career in nursing, attending (Name college) but things didn't work out and I had to withdraw from (Name College). Again, I decided that it was time to return to college in 2002 and since we were living in (City), (Name) was my college of choice. However, my career choice changed, and I have chosen business as my career path. I plan on graduating in December with a business degree and then transferring to (name of college).

Are you working while in college or have you worked in the past?

I have not worked since I have been in college. However, I have been working since I was 15 years old (before child labor laws) and have worked steadily ever since. I want and need to work part-time during the fall semester to help out with family expenses.

2. Why did you choose to go to college?

I have chosen to go to college to better myself and my family. There may come a time when my family depends on me for financial support and I want to be able to provide that support.

3. What is your proposed college major?

I plan on pursuing a degree in business with an emphasis in management from (name of college).

4. To what do you attribute your or your academic success and persistence in college?

I attribute my academic success to the support of all my family, plus my strength and determination to finish college. I have made many friends while at (name of college), some of those people have helped me greatly by helping me stay focused and motivated plus helping me over rough spots. I hope that I have been as great a help to them as they have been to me.

5. How have your relationships with people changed while at college?

I have made many friends while at (name of college). Not only students, but professors and staff as well. There have been so many people willing to offer assistance which has made college easier and lots of fun. I will always cherish the relationships and bonds that I have made and it will really be hard to leave (name of college). My life has become more enriched and I have been greatly blessed.

6. Please describe the social relationships you have had while attending college.

I have become a member of several (name of college) student organizations while I have been a student. I think that I have grown socially because of that. When I started back to college, it was really hard for me to adjust to being the older student with a group of 18-20 year olds. I really felt out of place but have found that interacting with younger students is easier than I first thought. Sometimes, it feels like they are looking up to me, as though looking for guidance or leadership. I try to help as much as I can. I have as many young friends from school as older friends and I enjoy each and every one of them.

7. (In relationship to question #6:) How much time do you spend in these relationships (Please be specific... how many hours a week with the various people that you mention and how do you know them, from class, socially, church, etc.)?

I spend approximately 4-5 hours a week with fellow student friends. Sometimes we study together or just visit with each other. The rest of the time is spent in class. I spend about 1 hour twice a month in (name of group) meetings and attend the advisor luncheon once a month. I attend SGA meetings occasionally since I am a committee member. I do spend more time with students my own age just because we have more in common with each other.

8. Did (or have) the new people that you met while in college give you a new perspective of your college experience? Of your academic success or persistence? Of your skills or talents?

Yes, the people that I have met in college have changed my whole perspective of college and what it takes to succeed in college. My confidence in succeeding in college was really low when I began but I have become friends with people just like me who have changed careers or are starting college at an older age and we cheer each other on and (name of group) helps us to help each other. I feel confident and have become more successful than I ever thought I could. I am extremely happy with the success I have achieved in college.

9. What or whom encouraged you in your studies? Peers, family, faculty?

My greatest encouragement has come from my husband and children. My younger son who is 15, helps me with some of my homework and helps me study when I need it. I think some of my professors (names deleted) have really had an impact on my academic success and have encouraged me to continue when I was about ready to give up.

10. Did you (or are you) receive (ing) any type of benefit from anyone while attending college?

I do think I received a benefit from the students that I met at the school. Our friendship has been a big help to me.

11. (If) You attended the orientation program; which part of the program (if any) did you find most beneficial?

What I found most beneficial about the orientation was the explanation of the school layout, studying tips (having been out of school for a long time), all of the support facilities (i.e. math lab, communications lab, computer lab) available for students.

12. If you could develop a segment for the new student orientation program, what would you develop to assist new students participating in orientation?

I would integrate a section in the orientation explaining how to use the (name of college) website and Blackboard. I had to figure out how to use it on my own which took time away from studying and other things. I just learned enough to get by and haven't been able to reap all the benefits that Blackboard has to offer. Also, it might promote taking more on-line courses which might benefit working adults who otherwise might not be able to take college courses.

13. What else would you like to tell me about this past year while you have been at the college?

I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at (name of college). I have not attended any other (name of college) campus because I really feel that the (name) campus has everything to offer students. Faculty and staff are wonderful and the benefits of this campus are tremendous. It is a large campus with a small campus feel, everyone is helpful and courteous. It's a great campus!!

14. What should I have asked you that I did not?

I think that you have covered all the pertinent areas in this questionnaire. There is a variety of questions and plenty of space to explain answers thoroughly in order to get a good feel for the information and opinions of those answering the questions.

15. (For statistical purposes only) What is your ethnicity and your age?

I am a 46 year old Native American female.

APPENDIX E

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVALS

Oklahoma State University
Institutional Review Board

Protocol Expires: 4/11/2005

Date: Monday, April 12, 2004

IRB Application No ED04105

Proposal Title: College Persistence: Social Networks and New Student Orientation Programs

Principal
Investigator(s):

Deke Johnson
310 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74078

George Erik Zoellner
12104 S. 85th E ave
Bixby, OK 74008

Reviewed and
Processed as: Exempt

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

Dear PI:

Your IRB application referenced above has been approved for one calendar year. Please make note of the expiration date indicated above. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact me in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, colson@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,


Carol Olson, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

George Erik Zoellner

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE: SOCIAL NETWORKS
AND NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

Major Field: Higher Education Administration

Biographical:

Education: Graduated from Union High School, Tulsa, Oklahoma in May 1982; Received Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma in May 1985; Received Master of Science degree in College Teaching with a Student Services emphasis from Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma in May, 1989; Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Higher Education Administration from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2004.

Experience: Transfer Coordinator for Rogers State College, Claremore, Oklahoma from 1991-1993. Employed at Tulsa Community College, Tulsa Oklahoma, from 1993 to 2004. Last position at Tulsa Community College was Dean of Student Services. Vice-President of Student Services, Panola College, Carthage, Texas, 2004-present. Previous positions include: Instructor of Skills Enhancement Program, Coordinator of Skills Enhancement Program, and Adjunct Instructor.

Professional Memberships: Oklahoma Association of Community Colleges; Oklahoma Academic Advisors Association; Oklahoma Colleges Student Support Service Administrators; National Council on Student Development; Texas Association of Community Colleges; North Texas Community College Consortium; and Texas Association of Admission and Records Officers.

Name: George Erik Zoellner

Date of Degree: December, 2004

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE, SOCIAL NETWORKS,
AND NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

Pages in Study: 135

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this case study was to examine students' social networks in relationship to their academic persistence. Students who attended the orientation program as well as students who have not attended the orientation program were interviewed to determine whether the orientation program aided in new tie development. Additionally, the issue of students' social networks in relationship to their academic performance was explored to determine if there was a correlation between students' social networks and students' academic persistence at a mid-western community college.

Findings and Conclusions: Sixteen students were interviewed for this study.

Demographic information was also obtained. The study suggested there was no direct correlation on students' academic persistence in relationship of those students who had attended the orientation program compared to those students who had not. Additionally, data revealed the vast majority of students who persisted at the institution created new weak ties compared to those students who did not persist. Community colleges should continually explore ways to assist students in creating new ties, which should aid the students in persisting at the college.

ADVISOR'S APPROVAL: Deke Johnson
