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A Case study to Examine Student Retention at a Less Selective University with a High Rate of Retention

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A Case study to Examine Student Retention at a Less Selective University with a High Rate of
Retention

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Administration

by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Richard and Lucille Palmisano. Without your unwavering support I would never have gotten this far. You have instilled in me the confidence to achieve my dreams and the persistence to see every endeavor to completion. To my husband Trevor Wendlowsky, you never let me stop believing in my own ability and have always had faith in me to succeed even when I doubted myself.

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"Ipsa scientia potestas est"

(Knowledge itself is power)

-Sir Francis Bacon

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Abstract

This case study sheds light on successful matriculation practices which emerge from the combination of institutional efforts and student needs. In order to discern successful matriculation data was collected in the form of interviews, observations, and documents at a less selective college with a high rate of retention. Mortimer Adler College possesses unique qualities with respect to curriculum, student population, teaching styles, and student life which affect retention in both positive and negative ways. The institution utilizes a highly structured Great Books curriculum and does not utilize traditional grading and assessment methods. The methods of student socialization are also explored through interviews with faculty and administrators. The findings of this study reveal the qualities of Mortimer Adler College which both support and hinder student success. The study also gives insight to the views of students within this unique institutional setting, focusing on their needs and goals and how their perceptions of the institution impact retention. The review of practices at this institution combined with the perception of the student body allows for the examination of programs and practices employed by Mortimer Adler College which aid in improving and supporting high retention that may also be used at other institutions of higher education.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Setting the Context: College Student Retention

Retention rates have been dropping across the country within higher education, decreasing nearly 3% in 2008 from the previous year, accounting for the loss of thousands of students (Lederman, 2009). Retention, an important topic, as it is often the figure considered when planning budgets for institutions and is a primary factor in the rating of institutions, within higher education is the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who re-enroll in a single institution after their first year of study (Hagedorn, 2005). While much has been done by institutions of higher education to attempt to improve retention, little has been effective in providing a remedy to falling retention rates (Lederman, 2009). This causes concerns with funding, such as students who take out loans for tuition who do not complete a degree then are unable to gain employment which allows them to repay these loans (Lederman, 2010). In light of recent policy changes in Louisiana as well as other states, retention remains a dominant issue ("Governor Jindal", 2010). Further, the economic stability of individuals and of the country comes in question when students are unable to repay government and privately issued loans (Dugas, 2009). Laredo (2007) asserts that if institutions are unable to create new methods to retain students, universities will fall short of their intended purpose of providing students with a quality education, further enabling these students to become more productive members of society through their ability to gain access to careers which will help grow the national economy. The issues of both retention and persistence should be further examined to understand both institutional methods and student needs.

Retention rate has been defined in the literature as the percentage of students who complete one year of study at an institution and re-enroll for a second year at the same institution (Hagedorn, 2005). This definition of retention is in line with the definition used by the National

Center for Higher Education Management Systems when calculating retention (NCHEMS, 2009a). NCHEMS calculates retention by "the number of first-time, full-time undergraduates who return either as full-time or part-time students" the fall semester following their initial fall enrollment. While this definition is similar to the definition stated by Hagedorn, it does not make a distinction between institutional efforts and student desire. This lack of distinction is prominent when considering the recent works of Jamelske (2009) and Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts (2006) who use the term "retention" very loosely, describing both institutional efforts and student desire through the term retention. The nuanced difference in the Hagedorn definition of retention is important as it provides only the perspective of the institution, leaving out the desires of the students whose perceptions are not considered through this type of institutional measure.

Alternately, Hagedorn (2005) defines persistence as a student's desire to continue their academic studies at a single institution. The author is careful to note the differences in these terms in that retention is an institutional measure, while persistence describes the intentions or decisions of individual students. This definition of persistence encompasses the tenants of Tinto's (1993) theory, which focuses on student perception as the main factor in explaining an individual's desire to maintain enrollment in a single institution. It is important to note the difference of these two terms, persistence and retention, because, although they both refer to the same notion, of staying at an institution, retention does not capture the student decision making process nor does it account for factors which cannot be controlled by the institution and its practices. Persistence captures all institutional and external factors which influence a student's desire to remain at an institution. For this study, both institutional retention and student persistence are be considered in order to gain understanding of both institutional actions which

attempt to retain students and student goals and needs which affect their persistence at a single institution.

The Importance of the Study of Retention and Persistence

The study of retention has been a central issue within higher education research for over three decades (Bragg, 1976; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Flores & Piana, 2000; Tinto, 1987). Tinto's work has become a central force within this research area, acting as a key model in understanding the rationale for the concept as a whole (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The literature surrounding the issue of student retention is fragmented in its support of Tinto's theory. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, J. C. (2007) do support the notion that there are two sides to the issue of retention, that of the student and of the institution. It is of vital importance to consider both the views of the institution and the student, noting that the combination of actions undertaken by an institution to support students along with the views and experiences of the students who attend form the basis for the decision to remain or to depart (Kuh, et al).

Institutions must consider many different variables among their students in order to support successful retention (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). According to Upcraft and Gardner, prior academic performance is the characteristic of students which garners the most focus, but culture, demographics, familial obligations, and personal development are also important factors which should be considered when making decisions about how to support students. Upcraft (1989b) suggests that within the realm of the department of student affairs at an institution, programs should be designed to aid and support the personal development of students in order to support their success. Not all students enter higher education with the goal of degree attainment; however it is the mission of these institutions to retain students in order to ensure their own

continuation (Flores & Piana, 2000; Laredo, 2007). Upcraft suggests that institutions should work to create programs which are specifically designed to further this type of development which will aid students in the formation of stronger relationships among peers and influence goal setting behaviors (1989b). The idea of promoting the development of successful relationships among students, faculty, and staff of an institution is supported by Gardner (2008), who found that these types of relationships increase student desire to persist at a single institution. Upcraft & Gardner also stress the importance of consideration of the "institutional climate" (p.9), which includes relationships with students and institutional members at all levels, the setting, and the services which are available to students on campus.

Institutional support for students in the freshman year is critical. Socialization, or the adaptation to a specific setting, is integral for students who must learn to function within the setting of higher education (Bragg, 1976). Banning (1989) suggests that the institution should provide a prescribed set of programs which will aid students in successful interaction with the campus environment. These programs should create the basis for freshmen orientation practices as well as become a portion of activities which should occur throughout the first year of study (Banning; Braxton & Lee, 2005). These activities should be designed to aid students in the process of overcoming the culture shock of the new academic and personal environment (Banning). This process will help students to become accustomed to their autonomy as both individual and student within the new setting. One method to support a student's academic transition, as suggested by Levitz & Noel (1989) is to create programming which relates what is learned in the classroom to real world practice. This can be accomplished through the support of service learning activities as well as activities which encourage students to use their skills to aid the larger community in which the institution is located. According to Banning the second goal

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in first year activities should work to build relationships with students and the institutional

members such as faculty and staff. These relationships will help students learn the methods and

requirements of the institution as well as provide a support structure for students during the goal

setting process. Student affairs staff should be carefully trained to provide academic support

which can aid students in selecting appropriate courses of study as well as helping them create

paths toward goal setting and achievement (Levitz & Noel). Finally, Banning stresses the

importance of creating a community within the larger institutional community. This idea calls

for the institution to build cohorts within the student population so that students will build

relationships with peers and create their own activities which support persistence.

The Effect of Institutional Differences on Retention

Most institutions, according to Levitz, Noel, and Richter (1999), predict retention rates

based upon the entrance qualities of their students. These authors suggest that because private

institutions generally recruit students with higher test scores and other qualities such as higher

socioeconomic status, parents who attended college, college attendance as a norm amongst peers,

and greater knowledge of the need for and benefits of a college degree, these institutions most

often display the highest rates of retention across the country. According to data from The

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, the average retention rate for

traditional full-time students was 76.6% in 2007and decreased to 76.0% in 2009 (NCHEMS,

2009b). The same source shows that the national rate for private non-profit institutions has

remained constant at 79.1% over the same period.

Berger & Lyon (2005) assert by contrast, that the less selective the institution, the lower

the retention rate, for both public and private institutions. The assertion by Berger and Lyon

regarding the relationship between selectivity and retention can be understood when considering

private institutions which are highly selective, such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, where

students admitted are required to have extremely high SAT/ACT test scores. These institutions

display an average retention rate of 98.67%. Less selective private institutions, whose

admissions profiles require that students SAT/ACT scores are at or above the 50th percentile,

display an average retention rate of 75.8% (IPEDS 2011).   The 208 private institutions which

fall into the category of less selective, requiring scores within the 50th percentile, compared to the

institutions which require higher test scores, such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, are in line

with Mortenson's (2005) review of institutional and testing data which supports the belief that

student entrance characteristics paired with institutional type helps determine retention estimates.

This author suggests that from the view of the institution, private institutions generally display

higher retention than public institutions with similar characteristics. The more selective an

institution's admission practices, the higher the rate of retention, a phenomenon which can be

correlated with the qualities of the students who attend these institutions (Mortenson). Often the

more selective, private institutions are able to employ more student affairs personnel due to

higher costs of tuition, who are thus able to provide a higher level of intervention to students,

having a positive effect on their decisions to persist (Berger & Lyon). The private, more

selective institutions also generally display a lower faculty to student ratio, allowing a greater

level of relationship building among students and their instructors (Berger & Lyon). Students

who have high grade point averages in high school and who also have high standardized test

scores generally perform better due to both a desire to be successful academically as well as a

higher level of mastery in core subject matter (Mortenson; Hagedorn, 2005).

Student Characteristics and Retention

When considering student characteristics, students who choose science, mathematics, and/or engineering disciplines as their major field of study are often less likely to persist (Hagedorn). Braxton & Lee (2005) found that if students primarily reside on campus, at least during their first year of study, the institutional retention rate will increase. This might be attributed to a higher level of socialization within the institutional community as well as a lessening in the burden of adapting, as students will interact with peers who will likely be experiencing the same phenomena (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).   The positive effect of campus residency on retention rates is also due to an institution's ability to influence the norms of students (Upcraft, 1989a). As institutions select and train the staff in their dormitory settings, the institution has the ability to promote specific activities and ideologies which support socialization and positive goal setting (Upcraft, 1989a). The various qualities of the institution and its students provide a set of general beliefs which inform the contemporary study of retention. While these qualities have been tested, they do not hold true to all institutions at all times.

Mortimer Adler College: A Less Selective Institution with a High Rate of Retention

Institutions such as the selected institution which will be known as Mortimer Adler College (MAC) for the purpose of this study, is a private, non-profit, 4-year, liberal arts college, which is not highly selective, has a retention rate of 78% at its Southwest campus (IPEDS, 2011). As a very small, 4-year, highly residential, less selective institution where the majority of students are full time MAC stands out as a forerunner when considering retention (IPEDS; "Carnegie Classifications", 2011). Among the 208 United States four-year institutions which are less selective the average retention rate for the 2010 academic year is 75.8% with a standard

deviation of 10.2 while the retention rate at MAC, Southwest is 78% for the same year (IPEDS).

There are 137 four-year colleges and universities in the United States which are classified by the

Carnegie Foundation as very small and highly residential, similar to MAC; the average retention

rate for these institutions is 67.14% with a standard deviation of 12.71 (IPEDS; "Carnegie

Classifications", 2011). Another comparison can be made with institutions where non-traditional

grading methods are employed; the average retention rate of the eight institutions with non-

traditional grading methods is 76.38% with a standard deviation of 12.25 (IPEDS).   There are

only two other institutions which employ only the Great Books Curriculum, similar to MAC, the

average retention rate for these two institutions is 77.5% with a standard deviation of 4.5

(IPEDS). Further when considering retention by state, the college shows higher retention than

average. The average retention rate in the state in which MAC is located is 69.3% while MAC,

Southwest, displays a retention rate of 78% (NCHEMS, 2009b). The unique qualities of the

institution support the need for understanding of both the retention activities employed by the

College and the student perceptions associated with maintaining enrollment in a single

institution. MAC is unique when compared to traditional higher education institutions. Some of

the unique qualities are: the Great Books Curriculum, students are required to reside on campus,

the institution does not support Greek organizations, there are no official athletics programs, and

standardized test scores are not required for admission. While the institution is unique, it still

allows for comparability to other institutions of higher education. The ability to compare MAC

with other institutions of different types is viable when considering both institutional retention

methods and student persistence as students in other institutions may have similar goals and

needs to that of the students at MAC. The institutional retention practices, such as non-

traditional admissions processes, maintaining small class sizes, requiring students to live on

campus, and supporting a culture of frequent interaction between faculty and students, as well as those which will be uncovered in the study may be beneficial to other institutional types, along with the high retention rate at this institution leads to the choice of Mortimer Adler College as the location for this proposed study.

The study fills a void in the literature regarding the perceptions of students related to their persistence decisions. Their voices have largely been overlooked when considering the issue of retention, being reduced to retention statistics alone in studies. Student goals and desires play an integral role in retention and these issues are of vital importance to institutions who are working to improve the student experience on campuses across the country (Astin, 1997; Berger, 2001; Flores and Piana, 2000; Schartman & Rhee, 2000; Yorke, 2004). While some, such as Astin and Yorke, have placed some focus on the student perspective, the focus of most research is on the institution with the student view only mentioned with little emphasis. Institutions of higher education cannot improve retention without careful attention to the needs and desires of students, who will ultimately decide their own fates within the educational system (Bragg, 1976). Pairing institutional efforts with student goals and needs is essential to improving retention across the country.

Statement of the Problem

The American Institutes for Research found that since 2003 nearly $5 billion per year has been lost in potential income and federal taxes due to the half a million students who did not complete college, marking retention as a problem which needs remedy at many colleges and universities across the country (AIR, 2011). Studies have shown that campus activities, student counseling and intervention, and socialization within the community aid in the improvement of retention rates, yet none of these actions has solved the issue of retention in the nation's colleges

and universities where retention is still falling (Lederman, 2009; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). If an institution is able to increase the rate of retention among students who are transitioning from first year of study to second year of study the institution will see an overall improvement of graduation rates (Levitz, et al, 1999). While improving retention at all levels of study is important, the first to second year transition is the time when the largest number of students will depart the institution, marking the importance of retention efforts at this time (Levitz, et al.). While theories suggest that the concept of retention is well understood, it is still a growing issue within higher education (Lederman, 2009; Tinto, 1987). Review of data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) shows that some private liberal arts colleges across the country display stability in rates of retention of students (IPEDS, 2011). This contradiction, the existence of less selective private liberal arts colleges with high retention within the larger setting of less selective colleges with decreasing retention, could be due to the setting of the institution, the programs created by the institution to support student socialization, and/or the qualities of the students who choose this institutional type. Solutions to the persistence/retention problem, such as those at Mortimer Adler College which has a higher than average persistence rate, may be more successful at pairing the needs of the university with the goals of its students (Astin, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

Purpose Statement

This case study examines student retention at a less selective private university with a high rate of retention to better understand the practices employed at this college which work to support its retention rate. The main focus of this study is to better understand successful retention practices at a single institution. Through observation and interviews with students and administrators, insight was gained to discover what programs and qualities exist at this institution

which support student goals and needs contribute to a high rate of student retention. The study is purposed to understand what the institution does to support student retention during the first year of study. The study also seeks to discover the needs of students and their goals within the academic environment of the institution. Areas of overlap among the two views, that of the institution and that of the students, is defined as *successful matriculation practices*. The following graphic displays areas of interest of this research as well as the placement of what qualities and actions will be considered successful matriculation.
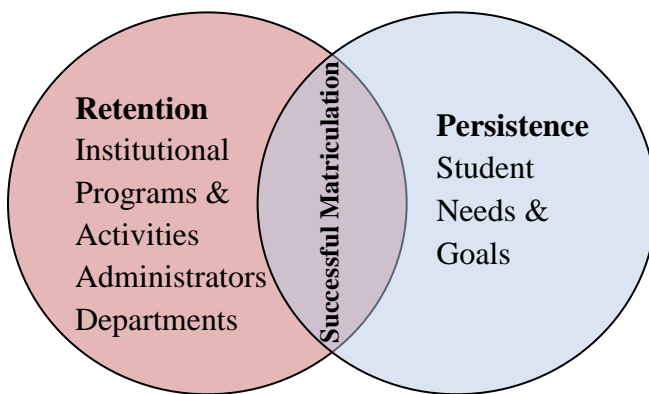
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Question

The study examines retention in an effort to answer the following research question: what are the dimensions of retention and persistence at a less selective institution with high retention? There are two sub-questions which will also be answered in support of the primary research question which are: why do students return to the institution after the first year of study?; and what does the institution do to support student retention?

Method

Case Study was used to examine student persistence based on Creswell (2007) who

defines this method as the study of a problem based upon the responses of participants who share

common characteristics. The case study method benefits this study through the ability to view

the concepts of retention and persistence through all aspects of the setting (Leedy & Ormrod,

2005). Mortimer Adler College has two campus locations; however research for the study took

place at the Southwest campus of Mortimer Adler College. This institution was chosen for its

high stable retention as well as for the unique qualities possessed by the institution, such as lack

of structured athletics programs, extreme focus on academics, and a high level of intensity

associated with the curriculum. According to data from the National Center for Education

Statistics, the Southwest campus retention rate is 78% (IPEDS, 2011). The table below shows the

retention rate over time for the MAC, Southwest campus (NCHEMS, 2009b; IPEDS, 2011).

Institution Type	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Average 2004-2010
National	76.5%	75.8%	75.0%	75.5%	74.7%	76.0%	NA	75.58%
National Private	79.1%	78.8%	78.3%	78.6%	78.1%	79.1%	NA	78.67%
Private Less Selective	76.4%	76.3%	75.4%	75.6%	75.1%	74.7%	75.8%	75.61%
Mortimer Adler College, Southwest	80%	76%	74%	69%	84%	75%	78%	76.57%

Table 1. Retention rates over time (IPEDS, 2011)

The population examined for this study is the student body and administrators at Mortimer Adler

College at the Southwest campus. Participants were comprised of eight currently enrolled

students who are in their second or third year of study, four current faculty members, two staff members from the Office of Student Affairs and Admissions, and two high level administrators.

Significance of Study

This study is significant as it sheds light on the actions and views of one institution and its students with a high rate of retention. While studies examining retention exist, the population of students chosen and the institutional characteristics are unique in comparison to previous works when considering the admissions and retention practices employed by the institution and the type of students enrolled who are unique in that they have chosen to attend a non-traditional college setting (Bragg, 1976; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Flores & Piana, 2000; Tinto, 1987). There are also no other studies at this specific location or institutions of this type. This study identifies and explores the practices employed to retain students as well as examines student needs which affect retention within a liberal arts setting. Further, the academic programs employed are unique to this specific institution as letter grades are not used for assessment and students are not divided into departments; all take the same courses in the same sequence. Courses are interrelated and many courses share one common text which is used across disciplines. No previous study has examined retention at an institution with these unique characteristics. This study provides an understanding of the dimensions of retention and persistence in this unique setting.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that findings cannot be generalized to a larger population however, institutions may attempt to employ methods from Mortimer Adler College in order to improve their own retention rates (Thomas, 2011). According to Thomas, Boeije (2010), and Creswell (2007) creating generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research; instead a deeper understanding of a problem is the desired outcome. The findings presented

present the retention and persistence practices at a single institution during a set time, institutions with differing characteristics and populations would likely not be able to adapt MAC retention practices in entirety, but could adjust their practices through the knowledge of individual characteristics which work to support student persistence.

A further limitation to the study is that Mortimer Adler College is currently implementing new programs and policies which may change the perceptions of participants. Study participants are aware of some of these changes and made speculations as to how these new implementations will affect their perceptions, but these speculations remain as unknowns and were largely taken as opinion since participants cannot know how the changes will truly affect their lives or when these changes will be implemented in the future. With this in mind, participant opinions could change in the future.

Finally, as the researcher was only allowed a limited amount of time to access the MAC campus the full scope of participant lives could not be observed. This limitation was necessary in order to remain minimally disruptive to the educational setting. This limited the types of activities which could be observed, but member checking was used to lessen the impact of this limitation.

Organization of Study

This chapter presented rationale for the study as well as the significance and research questions. Chapter 2 presents literature relevant to the key topics associated with retention and persistence to both provide rationale and grounding for the study. Chapter 3 describes the methodology employed for data collection and data analysis. Finally, Chapters 4 and 5 present the results of data analysis and conclusions which seek to answer the research questions previously presented.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This chapter will discuss the literature relevant to *student retention as it relates to the role of the institution, first year experience programs as a source of retention improvement, student development theories, student persistence, socialization of students within higher education,* and *the impact of faculty relationships on student persistence*. These topics will provide an overview of the main areas of research related to the study. Within the section which considers the role of the institution, institutional methods to ensure that students are retained and studies which have examined these methods will be discussed. The function of the office of student affairs will be discussed as related to the current theories of best practice regarding first year experience programs. Student development theories will be presented in order to offer insight into the cognitive development of students and to provide basis for why students set academic goals. To contrast the efforts of the institution, persistence will be examined in order to better understand how the needs and goals of students relate to current retention efforts made by institutions. Socialization of students within higher education will be discussed to provide understanding as to the importance of this process on both the decision of the student to remain at an institution as well as to provide rationale for institutional retention efforts. Finally, the relationships between faculty and students will be considered as they relate to student persistence. These faculty and student relationships will show the importance of students forming relationships within the academic setting.

The review of literature will include sources relevant to the issues of retention and persistence within the last five years. Older sources will be included to provide basis and background of each major theme and to illustrate the development of retention research throughout the years. Literature is chosen based upon relevance to the problems of retention and persistence with careful attention paid to the validity of the research. This review of literature on

retention is not meant to be exhaustive since the information presented is meant to support and inform the proposed study and is based upon the context of MAC, but will instead provide theoretical grounding for the study.

Institution

Retention

This section will examine the concept of retention through the view of the institution. Retention is an institutional term which refers to maintaining student enrollment from the first to second year of study (Hagedorn, 2005). The Hagedorn definition of retention is supported by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS, 2009a) use of the term, which assesses the phenomenon through an institutional lens without consideration for student perspective. There are many methods and theories which have been studied and suggested but few studies look to successful practice, instead focusing on what does not work and what should be changed.

Tinto's Interactionalist Theory. The best practices in student retention, as described by Tinto (1993) can be employed to examine colleges and universities from the administrative lens. Tinto's Interactionalist Theory focuses on levels of commitment of the institution towards its students based on academic and social groups, which require that the institution work to place student needs before the needs of the institution. This multi-dimensional theory emphasizes types of interactions a student will have on a college campus as the rationale to explain retention. Tinto places institutional actions at the center of his theory, giving important focus to both academic and social actions constructed by the institution which are designed to aid students. Tinto does consider entrance characteristics of students as well as student goals when explaining retention, but places a great emphasis on student interaction with university members and activities which are positioned, within his theory, far closer to the departure process than are

individual characteristics of students. Similarly, Tinto also examines the problem of retention

from the student perspective, employing the concept of departure to denote an action taken by

the student. Tinto (1987) describes student departure as arising from two factors, student goals

and student integration into the university community. Student goals, which are tied to entry

characteristics, describe an individual's intentions for their academic progress prior to and at the

beginning of entry into higher education according to Tinto's (1993) theory. Integration into the

university community is a portion of the theory which happens once the student has begun their

time within higher education and relies upon the student's ability to form relationships with other

institutional member, such as peers, faculty, and staff, as well as their ability to adapt to

institutional culture and ability to navigate academic challenges.   However, Tinto's (1993)

theory relies upon institutional actions to aid in socialization of students, rather than a student's

ability to adapt to the setting. The ability of a student to integrate within the academic

community requires that the institution provide support structures to aid students in identifying

aid where needed and requires that the institutional culture is conducive to the building of

relationships between not only students and peers but also students and faculty and students and

institutional staff. The culture of the institution can also help to reset the academic goals of

students to encourage students to progress towards degree attainment in cases where students did

not enter with this goal.

Tinto's work regarding student retention has been tested for validity (Braxton, Hirschy, &

McClendon, 2004). While Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon did not find all of the components

of Tinto's theory to be valid for all samples, through the development of tenets which are

components of Tinto's Interactionalist Theory, Braxton, et al. were able to test the validity and

importance of each component across institutional types.   Braxton, et al. do note that for some

groups Tinto's Interactionalist Theory is reliable to understand student retention within the higher education setting. Braxton, et al. found that for residential institutions social integration and goal setting were most important in student persistence decisions. The key concepts within Tinto's theory are the relationship of a student's ability to integrate within the university setting and their likelihood to persist to degree attainment (Kuh, et al., 2007). According to Kuh, et al., this portion of the theory requires that a student adapt to the academic and social demands of the setting in order to be retained at the institution.

The failure of Tinto's theory to act as a reliable guide for all settings could be due to the variety of characteristics of institutions across the country. Each college or university is unique and presents its own academic methods and culture. Each institution also has a population of students with unique student qualities and needs. Further, the disconnect between student goals and student socialization is cause for concern with Tinto's Interactionalist Theory. Kuh, et al. suggest that student goals may change through their integration within a campus community. If the culture of the campus community is supportive of degree attainment then a student who successfully integrates is more likely to set degree attainment as a goal. The ability to adapt to the environment is vital to student success as shown through numerous studies over the past few decades (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008). Oseguera and Rhee (2009) found that institutions actively seeking to improve their retention rate and thus focus all institutional members on these efforts are more likely to improve retention. This is not only a factor of *improved programs* but also a broader shift in the *institutional climate* where all members are more focused on better serving students. While study of institutional efforts is relevant it is important to understand how these efforts work with the perceptions of students within the college setting.

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Institutional Characteristics. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) also offer views on retention, based upon qualities of an institution. These authors base their views on retention largely on the entry characteristics of students; however they do note that some inherent qualities of colleges and universities have some bearing over the retention rate at a specific institution. These authors do not focus on retention as a function of socialization, unlike most of the current research; instead, the focus is placed on specific qualities of the institution which contribute to retention. These authors view the inherent qualities and the perceived reputation of the institution as rationale for the retaining of students. Within this theory, private institutions are more likely to display higher rates of retention. The phenomenon of high retention for private colleges and universities is explained by Pascarella and Terenzini through the need for a higher level of commitment to degree attainment due to the increased financial investment. Private institutions also often carry a reputation of providing a higher quality education or of demanding a higher level of rigor for student success. The perception of private institutions having a better quality often attracts students who display high prior academic performance and are more likely to complete due to their academic goals and aspirations without any action taken by the institution.

Yet another institutional quality which affects retention is the size of the campus population. The size of the institution is an important factor in understanding why smaller colleges and universities are more likely to retain students. In these smaller institutions the student to faculty ratio is generally small allowing students to have a greater level of interaction with their instructors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Further, students are more likely to interact with peers as they will have more contact with other students in smaller classes. Campuses with smaller class sizes also allow for various types of instruction which increases the likelihood of

discussion focused lessons which provide a deeper level of interaction among students and faculty.

Race and gender of the student population also influence the ability to retain students. If a student attends an institution with a large population of same race and/or gender students the student will be more likely to be retained. Retention due to the ability of students to identify peers who are similar in race and gender is less the action of the institution, though it can be argued if an institution works to ensure that the campus population is diverse with regards to race and gender students will be more likely to adapt to the environment as they are presented with fewer new ways of acting and thinking. To continue the Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) view of adaptation as related to retention, students who live on campus, which is a requirement of some institutions, display a higher rate of retention as students are more likely to become involved in social activities. Success in academics is also a likely goal of resident students as they are more likely to interact with classmates outside of class time. This idea of goal setting for success, the process of setting a goal to continue towards degree attainment, is supported by Pascarella and Terenzini who view the influence of peers as a positive influence for students. If an individual student is considering departure they will be likely to reevaluate this choice if they are involved in activities because they will not want to leave the peer group. Further, students who participate in team activities will be more likely to remain at the institution as they will not likely want to leave the team, causing a detriment to the entire group (Pascarella & Terenzini).

A study by Schmitt and Duggan (2011) speaks to the importance of institutional staff as a function of student retention. These authors found, through interviews and observations with non-teaching staff members, that students are more likely to approach institutional staff as opposed to faculty with problems which directly influence retention. This research shows that

staff will function as problem solvers for students more often than faculty and will aid students in overcoming hindrances to continuing their enrollment. The importance of this study is that institutions should carefully hire staff members who have a desire to help students. Institutions should also offer training and preparation for these individuals who serve as the face of the college or university. According to Schmitt and Duggan, faculty interact with students on a more regular basis during class time, but staff members will have a deeper level of interaction with students and can be the cause of a student's decision to remain at the institution. The findings of this study call for an understanding of how the training of staff members and the choice of faculty affect retention at an institution such as MAC where retention is high.

The common thread which unites the works mentioned in this section is the desire by institutions to control student enrollment. Institutions seem to share the belief that once a student is enrolled the student will be retained if a prescribed course of action is followed. Further, rather than adapt to students there is, in this literature, a feeling that certain institutional actions will influence student thought and action ultimately leading to their decision to stay at the institution. Rather than seeking to combine institutional action with student needs, these studies highlight an ideology of the focus on institutional efforts over student desires as influences on student continuation at an institution from one year to the next.

First Year Experience Programs

This section will provide literature surrounding the current methods of retention practices which are employed on a large scale across institutions in the United States. The Office of Student Affairs lies at the center of retention efforts on most campuses and is the primary source for retention-improving activities. Studies have shown that if students are retained after their first year of study the likelihood that they will depart in subsequent years decreases drastically

(Levitz and & Noel, 1989). The literature presented will describe current efforts and programs which have been implemented across the country. This section does not attempt an exhaustive review of student affairs programs at every institution in the United States, but instead works to present the current trends which are considered best practices as well as newly proposed methods which aim to improve retention rates in higher education.

  First Year Experience. One popular method of improving both retention and student experience at higher education institutions is the First Year Experience program as described by Jamelske (2009). According to the this author, there is no standard for this type of retention program and each institution which employs this method does so differently, some level of success can be seen through student participation in First Year Experience programs. These programs are clearly designed to improve retention, but the lack of standardization and the obvious lack of faculty and staff buy-in which can be inferred from this study are troubling. The concept presented is relevant but far more attention to planning and execution is needed in order to prove that these programs are successful. Jamelske made attempts to link First Year Experience Programs to retention rates. The author assessed the First Year Experience program at one institution in order to discover the benefits of the program based on cost. The institution in the Jamelske study incorporated socialization methods within introductory courses which were standard within the institutional curriculum. Students were able to select First Year Experience courses or standard courses to fulfill basic academic requirements as well as aid in their adjustment to life within the higher education system. Courses within this program were designed to incorporate a mentor program, knowledge about the institution, knowledge about the area surrounding the institution, future career opportunities related to the chosen area of study, as well as tips for success in higher education. While Jamelske points out that the courses were not

completely effective in meeting all requirements due to implementation issues, one issue is that this program required faculty to incorporate first year experience information into courses which would not typically cover this information, such as biology and calculus. This necessity to incorporate first year experience activities into existing courses was not implemented in a uniform manner, allowing each faculty member to add first year experience knowledge to courses as they saw fit. Yet another implementation issue is that there were no formal requirements for faculty to apply to participate in this program and there were no added assessment techniques to ensure that students received the proper information in meaningful ways. Even with these issues, many students responded that they perceived the program as beneficial. The author also suggests that, for this specific institution and program, students who enrolled in First Year Experience courses which were related to their subject of interest would increase the institutional retention rate by 6%. This data reinforces the importance of First Year Experience programs which are aligned with academic activities. When students are able to gain knowledge from First Year Experience programs which are aligned with academic interests the students are more able to relate to the information presented and respond more positively to First Year Experience methods.

Schrader and Brown (2008) performed a study on success of students within First Year Experience programs and found that institutions must create these programs to fit the needs of their specific student populations. Similar to the Jamelske (2009) study, the Schrader and Brown institution created courses which paired subject specific coursework with student integration activities such as learning how to use the library to find information on a topic which is of interest to all students in the course, how to find academic assistance for a particular subject, and how to study as a group. However, unlike the Jamelske case, the Schrader and Brown

institution's First Year Experience courses were elective courses and focused on knowledge of

campus life and college level academic skills instead of focusing on a specific subject matter

with skill lessons added as secondary knowledge. Through this assessment, the authors found

that males and females have very different needs when adapting to college life. First Year

Experiences, according to Schrader and Brown, courses should not only be tied to academic

subject matter but should also be specific to groups according to gender, race, and other

important groups such as honors or degree specific. By creating programs which are specific to

groups of students who share similar attributes, the specific needs of each group can be

addressed using the most appropriate methods. These programs might also be more beneficial as

they would allow students to form peer groups among students who have similar interests and

needs. This could negatively impact diversity, but would enable students, at least in their first

year of study, to identify peers who have similar interests.

   Adaptation to the College Setting. An important method of retention is altering the ways

students view education and their ability to achieve within the higher education system, when

students are not confident in these areas, this method is often employed by Student Affairs staff

to aid students during their first year of study (Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley, & Pearce,

2009). Student Affairs staff are often the source of instruction for First Year Experience

programs and should form an institutional support system for students so that students are able to

identify professionals who are able to help with problem solving and advising (Blake, 2007).

According to Brownlee, et al., students who participate in first year experience seminars which

aim to promote student development must learn to change how they view learning and how

methods of learning in higher education are different from methods employed in the K-12

system. These authors also found that when students are aided in confronting their past learning

methods they are better able to change these methods, leading to a higher level of critical thinking and a greater level of academic success in higher education. Similarly, Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordstrom (2009) found that students entering higher education suffer anxiety in adjusting to academic methods, such as independent study, critical thinking based assignments, and increased rigor in coursework, without the assistance of First Year Experience programs which aid students in understanding and adapting to teaching methods used in colleges and universities. An improved level of academic success, according to Brownlee, et al., enables students to persist in higher education as they are able to set goals of completion which are perceived as achievable. Brinkworth, et al suggest that without the aid of First Year Experience programs students must learn to adjust to the academic methods employed by institutions of higher education on their own, which often creates undue anxiety and feelings of failure and inability to succeed.

Dissemination of Information. Another important function of the Office of Student Affairs as suggested by Hunter & Murray (2007) is to disseminate information to faculty, staff, and student mentors in order to support First Year Experience programs. These authors suggest that one of the most vital functions of Student Affairs is to create a teaching atmosphere which is supportive of first year students' success at the institution. The Office of Student Affairs, according to Hunter & Murray, should inform all faculty and staff of the needs of the current student population as well as serve as the trainers for student mentors. Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo (2006) suggest a model in which all members of the institution should participate in retention efforts. The authors suggest the inclusion of faculty, staff, and student mentors in activities associated with teaching first year students how to navigate the culture of higher education.   According to these authors, the inclusion of all members in first year experience

programs, knowledge of the importance of assisting new students in successfully assimilating into the college environment will be disseminated to all institutional members and will become an important part of the cultural ideology at the institution. The First Year Experience program detailed by Allen (2004) presents a method in which faculty members are directly involved with the design and delivery of the program to new students. In this example, the author presents a program in which faculty serve as mentors to students, guiding them through the expectations of higher education in the format of a course which focuses on American citizenry. Allen does note that as the program was developed over a nine year period, the faculty, as a group, realized that it is essential to ensure each faculty member is comfortable with the role they place in the First Year Experience program. Ensuring faculty confidence in individual roles enables each faculty member to best serve students in a manner which will be most beneficial to both students and the faculty member.

Integration within the Campus Community. While the academic component of First Year Experience programs is important, Student Affairs staff must also work to ensure that students are successful in integrating socially within the campus environment. Reason, et al. (2006) stress the importance of providing knowledge and access about the various student organizations on campus to incoming freshmen. The authors suggest that student organizations not only provide peers which can form a social support system but may also reinforce positive academically focused habits. Blake, in his 2007 article, suggests that Student Affairs staff should function as conduits enabling students to find connections between academic and social life at an institution. According to Blake, through this assistance with finding a balance between academics and social life, students will more easily identify peers who will form both social and academic support. Institutions where cohorts are assigned or where students are required to

reside on campus show greater success regarding retention as students are able to form relationships which serve as student support systems and allow students to identify peers with similar interests and goals (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts (2006) detail a program which functions independently of First Year Experience programs, but still works to aid in improving student retention. In their study the authors detail a program which allows first semester freshmen to join a learning community which forms an academic and social cohort. Each learning group shares a course schedule and participates in academic and social activities as a group for one semester. This program has proven to improve retention through its components of building academic relationships, social relationships, and learning to live on campus within the institutional community. According to the authors, the cohort method, in which students who begin their studies at the same time function as a group, taking the same courses, and being encouraged to work together during their time at the institution, allows each group of students to create their own culture within the institutional setting. Students are further aided by the notion of being accountable not only to themselves and the institution but also to other members of the cohort. This higher level of support from peers paired with the ability of Student Affairs staff to tailor activities to smaller groups of students aids in the improvement of retention according to Hotchkiss, et al.

Although institutional discussion about retention centers around control over student decision making, programs presented by Offices of Student Affairs across the country work to promote a *successful pairing of institutional actions with student needs*. While the programs are still slightly skewed towards improving retention and not meeting student needs and relationships seem somewhat contrived based upon the best practices as described in the literature. Studies in this area as discussed in this section do not focus on specific components

within the First Year Experience, nor is there mention of which components are successful in improving retention. The research surrounding student affairs is largely suggestive and abstract, giving little concrete evidence to support the adoption of a specific method as suggested by the literature. Further, there is a lack of research focusing on successful institutions when considering retention. Instead, single methods are tested and evaluated. The study of student affairs practice at institutions with high rates of retention is overlooked in favor of testing models to improve retention at institutions with low retention rates.

<div align="center">***Students***</div>

Student Development Theories

While it is important to consider the efforts of student services on college campuses it is also important to consider how student psychological development relates to socialization and student persistence. The literature selected provides a basis for the understanding of psychological development of students who are in their first year of postsecondary education. No attempt will be made to cover all theories associated with development at this stage, instead theories are chosen based on their relevance to the literature presented in this chapter. These theories, cultural theory and Chickering's Theory of Identity Development, will help to provide a framework for the consideration of college student persistence.

Cultural Theory. This section will focus on cultural theory, which attempts to explain an individual's "worldview" (p. 67) as it relates to their ethnic and social background (Newman and Newman, 2009). Newman and Newman explain cultural theory as a form of cognitive development which is derived from both the ethnic and family setting an individual experiences from birth to adulthood. Development stems from the family norms which may or may not be dependent upon a specific ethnicity. If the family is closely connected to a specific ethnic group it is more likely that the development of a child will follow the norms of this ethnicity.

However, families do create their own norms and these ideals are passed to the children to form a cognitive belief system. Newman and Newman are careful to include that an individual may break away from their cultural beliefs as they progress in development if they leave the ethnic or family group, but the individual is more likely to retain many cultural norms with some adaptation imposed through personal development. This is similar to the adjustment which must occur for college students when beginning higher education. The students must learn to adapt to the institutional norms and to the culture of the institution and of fellow students.

Phinney's Model of Ethnic Identity Development (Phinney, 1988; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) is similar to the Cultural Theory presented by Newman and Newman (2009). Phinney describes a three stage process which requires that an individual, specifically college students, must attempt to define themselves within the context of their family or ethnic norms as well as the new demands and beliefs which form the norms of a college or university in which they are enrolled. Velasquez (1999), in his study of Chicano college students, displayed similar views, suggesting that students must come to terms with a dual view of self in order to persist within higher education. These authors describe a system in which a college student must learn to adapt their learned ways of thinking, derived from family tradition, to the academic and social norms of an institution of higher education in order to be able to persist (Phinney;Evans et al; Newman and Newman; Velasquez).

Love and Guthrie (1999) expand upon the importance of culture in college student development focusing on the importance of family expectations on a student's desire to persist in higher education. These authors further discuss the importance of the building of the student-faculty relationship to promote a culture of the desire to persist among college students. Within higher education institutions faculty must serve as the adult mentors for students, taking the

place of adult family members who are no longer a daily component of life. The combination of family culture to obtain a postsecondary degree along with the development of strong student-faculty relationships create a new culture among students which Love and Guthrie suggest is conducive to high rates of persistence among college students.

   Identity Development. Chickering (1968) presented a theory of identity development which describes the changes in personality and critical thinking skills of individuals aged 18-25. In this theory, Chickering focuses on college aged students who are working to adapt to a new lifestyle as an independent person working towards the development of an adult career. Chickering presents seven vectors through which he describes the process of maturation to adulthood. The first vector, development of competence, presents a stage during which the individual learns skills to enable access to career opportunities; this is closely linked to the type of knowledge and skills gained in higher education. Management of emotions is the second vector, a stage which hinges upon an individual's ability to react to people and events in an appropriate manner. The third vector, development of autonomy, is a time when an individual is able to function as an independent adult. This is a transitional time for college students, who are adapting to the absence of parents and learning to make decisions on their own. The next vector is development of identity, the time during which an individual becomes secure with who they are as an adult. The fifth vector is the development of interpersonal relationships. This vector describes the ability to build meaningful relationships with others which are based upon a mutual exchange. Development of purpose is the sixth vector, which is the time an individual makes career and other decisions regarding their future. The final vector is development of integrity, a time during which personal values and ethical beliefs are set. While all of Chickering's vectors are equally important for the proper development of the individual, the sixth vector is important

within the context of higher education persistence decision making. It is at this time that an individual may realize that persisting towards degree attainment is an important step to achieve their career of choice for the future.

Chandler, Beamer, Williams, and Armstrong (1958), in their book Successful Adjustment in College, work to provide a method for student development which incorporates both cultural theory and Chickering's Theory. These authors write to a new college student with the intent to aid the student to ease the transition into higher education. These authors begin their discourse by focusing on the importance of building relationships, much like several of the vectors presented by Evans, et al. (1998). The development of important relationships, with family, peers, and other institutional members, is described by Chandler, et al. as a function of being a participant in campus activities. Students are encouraged in the text to identify organizations on campus and to become an active participant in these organizations in order to promote the formation of relationships which will, according to the authors, ease the student's transition into the institutional culture.

The literature presented in this section provides a foundation for understanding how cultural norms influence students' college experiences which include decisions to stay in college or leave. Norms created by family and ethnic ties guide college students towards the decision to continue their education or to depart the institution. The importance of the formation of relationships with peers is shown as the basis for a student's ability to adapt to the institutional setting. Further, faculty relationships can create adaptations to pre-entry beliefs which may guide students to the desire to persist in higher education.

Persistence

This section will discuss student persistence with careful attention to individual characteristics and background experiences which influence a student's decision to remain enrolled at a single institution of higher education. As retention is a term which describes institutional action, persistence will be used to describe a student's desire to maintain enrollment in a single institution past the first year of study (Hagedorn, 2005). The literature presented will highlight student needs and goals as well as issues which impede student persistence in higher education.

Student Goals and Needs. When compared to Tinto's (1993) work, Astin (1997) found that institutions have less impact on retention through their interactions with currently enrolled students than the goals and needs of students. Astin (1991) suggests that retention is greatly impacted by the students who chose to attend the institution, as described in his Talent Model. Astin's Talent Model asserts that students who attend institutions with high retention rates are those with higher standardized test scores and high academic achievement in the K-12 setting and are likely to persist in higher education regardless of the college or university they attend (1991). This work clearly shows that retention is a direct effect of the type of students who select to attend a specific institution. Allen, Robbins, Casillas, and Oh (2008) attempt to explain the phenomenon of students who are more likely to remain at a single institution due to prior high performance, stating that a student who has been a high performer is more likely to come to higher education with the goal of degree attainment and academic success. They note that high performing students are typically those who enter colleges and universities with a greater level of parental support and often have more financial resources available to them. These students are also more likely to possess the ability to identify academic assistance when needed. Allen, et al.

do admit that along with this past performance each student must also have a personal desire to succeed in higher education as well as form a network of support. Astin's work does not account for less selective institutions with high retention rates. As previously stated, current data from IPEDS (2011) shows that some less selective private institutions, like the one being studied here, do report high retention without a focus on student past performance. Currently, there are no studies which explain this phenomenon.

Finances. Herzog (2005) found that a common issue which affects student persistence is finances. The author found that financial aid offerings, family socioeconomic status, and residency directly affect a student's decision to persist. Herzog further suggest that students with limited or no financial support from family often experience difficulty in persistence as employment influenced their goals and priorities. Likewise, the same study suggests that students attending out-of-state schools experience increased tuition costs, limitations on scholarships, and additional costs of living apart from family. The financial burdens often felt by students have strong implications on persistence decisions. These factors are often not remedied by institutional support and are thought of as factors which cannot be solved or prevented by institutional effort.

Student persistence is influenced by their needs, goals, psychological development, and social support. Student factors, such as goal setting, finances, and academic trouble, do play a role in retention rates in higher education and should be considered as a key part of the equation. While institutions should work to aid students in maintaining enrollment until degree attainment, the ever changing needs and goals of students should be recognized as independent of the institution in the sense that students arrive with these influences. Not every student will persist and the reasons for this are not fully understood and surely complex, but careful attention to

student desires will aid in allowing institutions to create proper methods of support. Persistence

cannot be considered entirely independently of retention, but if paired, persistence and retention

together can achieve the goal of ensuring the majority of students maintain enrollment in a single

institution.

Hybrid Models

Student Socialization

Socialization is presented in the literature as a "process by which an individual acquires the

social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (Van Maanen & Schein,

1979, p.211). Van Maanen and Schein present dimensions of socialization which are relevant to

the idea of students becoming a part of the academic climate of higher education institutions.

These dimensions are each a pair of states of being which allows for adaptation to the new

environment. The first dimension contrasts collective socialization and individual socialization,

which describes a climate in which newcomers to the organization must adapt either as a group

or as an individual. The second dimension contrasts formal socialization and informal

socialization, which provides rationale for institutions whose process of bringing in newcomers

is very prescribed versus those whose process is less structured allowing for individuals to find

their own place within the organization. This dimension is similar to the third dimension which

is "sequential vs. random" (p. 241). Sequential socialization describes a process with a specific

method which must occur in a prescribed order, unlike random socialization during which

newcomers are allowed to find ways to adapt and learn the institutional norms in an order which

comes naturally to each individual. In the fourth dimension fixed socialization, which must

occur during a defined time frame such as in structured job training programs, is contrasted with

variable socialization, in which the time frame is determined by each individual and is thus

variable dependent upon each person. The fifth dimension contrasts serial socialization with

disjunctive socialization. Serial socialization requires that current members of an organization

work with newcomers to aid in assimilation. Disjunctive socialization occurs when there is an

absence of mentors and newcomers must forge their own paths within the institution. The final

dimension describes both investiture and divestiture as contrasting components of socialization.

The investiture process allows individuals to incorporate their own experiences into their

adaptation to the culture of the organization. This is contrasted by divestiture which requires that

newcomers give up some of their personal beliefs in order to accept those of the organization.

These dimensions function as components of the socialization process. Through a combination

of the six dimensions Van Maanen and Schein believe that socialization naturally occurs. Each

organization functions at various levels within each dimension, thus each institution of higher

education will function with different components as part of their organizational norms. The

identification of these components within an institution's culture can aid in the improvement of

retention through the acceptance of components of socialization which will best serve the student

population.

 Student Relationships. Student socialization, or the student's ability to adapt to the

environment, has a direct relationship to the student's interaction with faculty and peers at the

institution (Gardner, 2008). Student socialization is the most important tenet of retention

following student entry characteristics (Bragg, 1976). Van Maanen (1976) states that

socialization is a process which is constantly evolving during an individual's time within an

organization. Van Maanen also describes anticipatory socialization which takes into

consideration the entry characteristics of an individual as part of the socialization process. This

is similar to the institutional view of retention in that institutions assume that students who have

been high academic performers, have parents who achieved degrees within higher education, and have knowledge of the importance of higher education to future career success will be more likely to persist than those who do not possess these entry characteristics. Gardner found that, for doctoral students, their desire to persist towards degree attainment was affected by their relationship with other key members of the university which supports the views of Tinto (1993), who states that institutions with low student to faculty ratios display higher retention rates. This is similar to small private institutions where student to faculty ratios are typically low. Pascarella and Terenzini (1976) found that students who frequently interacted with faculty members outside of organized class time performed better academically and were more likely to be retained due to stronger relationships which were formed between faculty and their students. These views are also supported by those of Van Maanen and Barley (1984), who describe socialization occurring within a community setting. Van Maanen and Barley use this idea of community as a place in which each individual creates their own role within the group. This provides the idea, supported by Tierney and Rhoads (1994), that the culture of the organization is formed by the members who have created their own roles. The organizational culture does change as newcomers enter, but according to Tierney and Rhoads some members will be more accepting of the organizational culture and will be more likely to support the organization's actions and mission. Some will, however not be as supportive of the culture and will be more likely to either depart or to experience a greater level of personal change during their time within the organization. Gardner's work shows that goals are influenced by successful socialization by the student. A study by Gardner (2007) further attests to the importance of goal setting for socialization to occur. In this study Gardner found that doctoral students who had trouble setting clear goals and who did not have a clear academic path set by the institution felt they had trouble

assimilating to the university setting. The author uses these findings as a rationale for the

problem of retaining graduate students. This finding supports Bragg's theory that institutions

should work to "develop salient missions" within the various departments of study (p. 9). The

presented view of socialization reaffirms Tinto's Theory by highlighting the importance of

student interaction within the university community in order to achieve success within a program

of study (Golde, 2005). These studies show that while Tinto separates socialization from student

goals, the two concepts function as a singular, interconnected issue. Successful socialization by

students to the institutional culture allows for goal setting in a manner which is supportive of

student retention.   This is important when considering MAC, where the uniqueness of the

institution creates a setting which is very different from the traditional school atmosphere.

Students must find methods, with institutional support, to adapt to this new setting and to set

goals of continued matriculation.

   Assimilation. From the student point of view, McKinney, Saxe, and Cobb (1998) along with

Tinto (1993) and Golde (2005) describe, socialization is a phenomenon which acts as a learning

process. The more frequently a student is exposed to a setting and the experiences which

commonly occur within this setting the more assimilated the student tends to become (McKinney

et al; Tinto; Golde). This is contrasted by the institutional point of view which is promoted by

many authors who refer to socialization as a phenomenon which is primarily supported by the

institution and its programming within the context of retention improvement efforts (Bean &

Eaton, 2002; Schartman & Rhee, 2000; Berger, 2001). However, Astin (1997) presents a view

of socialization which allows the natural progress of this experience from both the student and

institutional points of view. The author does attest to the ability of an institution to create a

setting which is more conducive to ease of student assimilation but admits that it is up to the individual student to accept the new setting.

When considering faculty within higher education socialization is described by Tierney (1997) as the learning of a culture by new faculty which is created by those who are already a part of it. That is, the author feels that institutions do not create their own culture which must be learned, but the culture is constantly changing based upon ideals and needs of the members of the institution. Tierney asserts that there is no need to attempt to force acculturation because each new member will cause changes to the institutional culture and will naturally fit into the setting in a way that will best fit the individual but not necessarily the organization. Applying this concept to student socialization it can be said that each new group of students admitted to an institution will create a change in the culture to fit their own needs. Thus, attempts to force socialization will be counterproductive as this practice symbolizes an institution which is not accepting of change which will not meet the needs of its members as they change over time.

Socialization in Organizations. To further understand the concept of socialization the phenomenon should be viewed outside of the context of higher education. Jokisaari and Nurmi (2009) assessed the perceived level of satisfaction of new employees when considering their relationship development with organizational members. They found that socialization within the business world occurs when an individual gains knowledge needed to function within a new system. These authors suggest that through interactions with organizational members "newcomers" (p. 527) gain information and become comfortable functioning within the system if interactions are positive. These authors suggest that the greater the level of positive contact with superiors the less likely it is that a new employee will leave the organization. This study focuses on the importance of creating positive relationships within an organization in order to assist new

members in adapting to the norms of the organization as well as improving satisfaction of employees. This can be compared to the university setting in that faculty and administrators should attempt to find ways to interact with students in a positive manner in order to support successful retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These authors highlight the importance of organizational understanding of the relationships of members. Organizations should work to ensure that positive relationships between members at all levels are dominant within the organizational culture.

According to Gomez (2009), socialization cannot be forced, but may occur if information is adequately transferred to new members of an organization. The author suggests that there are several forms of socialization which can occur within organizations and that the level of socialization differs depending upon the entry characteristics of new members and the variability of level of commitment desired by the organization. Gomez describes organizations which vary in their flexibility of accepting the qualities of new members into organizational norms, citing the example of organizations which demand that a new member fully adapt to organizational methods which requires the abandonment of old habits. This level of complete adaptation creates a system in which members who are successfully socialized tend to remain at the organization, but the socialization process takes far longer and few new members will be able to adjust and will likely depart. Generalizing this concept to universities, it is suggested those that create an environment where students are successfully socialized to the norms, values, and behaviors of success, are more likely to retain their students. In contrast to the complete adaptation type, Gomez describes organizations which allow for variation in habits, where new members socialize relatively quickly and with greater ease, but are less likely to feel a deep connection with the organization and may depart after only a short time. Certainly the difficulty

most students experience in the transition from high school to college (Kirst & Bracco, 2004) makes it less likely to consider that socialization in this form is an easy process

Contrary to the work by Gomez (2009), Ashforth and Saks (1996) promote a view of employee orientation methods which are specifically designed to socialize new members. In this view the organization holds control over the socialization process and the employees are given specific information which will better facilitate the phenomenon. Jones (1986) mirrors the Ashforth and Saks view referring to the existence of a socialization process by which specific outcomes can be attained.

Both the academic and business realms display opposing views of the concept. One view is that students or new employees learn how to assimilate through their experiences with an institution or organization. This method allows for the gradual adoption of shared beliefs paired with individual goals and needs. This natural socialization process seems to allow an individual a greater level of comfort with the process, yet can lead to a desire to depart the setting (Jones, 1986). The opposing view allows an institution or organization to influence how socialization will occur. Jones describes this process as rigid and has a prescribed order to which the new member will be given information and expected to accept a new way of being. This method, which emerged from the business world, is being adopted by academic scholars as a means to promote student retention (Berger, 2001). The institution expects that through specific actions the students will be given the tools they need to assimilate in a specified time frame. This method, however, does not allow for individualism and does not provide the time or the means for goal setting (Gardner, 2007). This forced socialization has the potential to leave students with unclear expectations for their academic careers.

Retention and Persistence Combined

Institutional practices and characteristics also have an impact on student persistence decisions. Astin, in his 1997 study on institutional retention rates, found that small institutions with a highly residential student population were better able to retain students. This study also shows that while entry characteristics of students are important factors in retention, institutional characteristics, such as size, the type of academic assistance available, the presence of social activities and organizations, and the culture of the institution, also play a vital role in retaining students. Astin's study showed that institutional size, a student's chosen major, and requiring students to live on campus made a difference in student persistence decisions which superseded entrance characteristics for many students.

Academic Goals. Student goals and needs are the main tenets of persistence decisions. Richmond (1986) continues with the idea of linking learning to practice in mind, it is important for institutions to aid students in selecting appropriate programs and disciplines which will fill their personal and goal centered needs. Flores and Piana (2000) agree that students' prior performance is an indicator of retention but also, similar to Tinto (1993), suggest that each student has fluctuating goals throughout their academic career. These authors imply that students may or may not enter an institution of higher education with the goal of degree attainment. Students who enter with the intent to complete may decide, according to Flores and Piana, at any point during their studies, that degree attainment is not necessary, stressing that the socialization of students is an integral task of the institution. Yorke (2004) mirrors this sentiment by urging institutions of higher education to focus on building a sense of community on college campuses. This is illustrated through an examination of distance learning in Great Britain, where traditionally aged students often leave their studies due to lack of support from peers and from

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the institutional community as a whole. Wilcox, et al. (2005), found that students who left an institution most commonly cited social factors as the primary reason for departure. These authors found that students who do not live on campus often have difficulty adjusting to the setting due to the lack of social contact with peers at the institution, feelings of isolation, and difficulty adjusting to course demands. Wilcox, et al suggest that it is important for first year students to build ties with peers and to become part of the university community in order to aid in academic success, and to combat isolation. Burks and Barrett (2009) mirror the views of Wilcox, et al in that their findings support the importance of promoting peer relationships through engaging in activities such as Greek life, religious organizations, or more formal study groups. These authors did not find that living on campus was a factor in persistence but did stress the heightened importance of building peer relationships for students who did not live on campus.

Student Support Programs. While institutions across the country have numerous programs in place to aid in successful retention, Bean and Eaton (2002) suggest that activities which build upon a student's ability to develop intellectually enable the student to better adapt to the higher education setting. This theory hinges upon the belief that retention is an outcome of student decision alone. These authors feel that institutions can aid student development but have no bearing on the decision to persist at the institution. The authors suggest that institutions work to provide methods for students to create support systems and to help create a sense of community but ultimately the student must accept these methods and, along with influence from outside forces, adapt to the environment. Bean and Eaton offer research which focuses on the importance of the student perspective. This focus places retention as a function which cannot be improved by the actions of the institution.

Curriculum. Another issue which impacts persistence of students in higher education is the

lack of standardization of post-secondary coursework. Meyer, Spencer, and French (2009) found

that students fall on opposite ends of the spectrum when considering their perspectives on

coursework. These authors found that while some students felt that coursework was too difficult

and that they were not prepared for the level of commitment needed for success, the majority of

students felt that courses during their first year of study in higher education were not challenging

enough. Due to the extreme variation in the level of rigor necessary to be academically

successful in all courses, students may either feel that coursework is not challenging enough and

thus not necessary or that it is too difficult and success is not achievable (Brinkworth, et al.,

2009). Either way the impact on students' decisions to stay can be negative.

Qualities of the Institution. Contrary to the findings previously stated, that student

characteristics control retention, Schartman and Rhee (2000) assert that within the institutions

they studied retention is often influenced by the institution itself, not the student demographics.

This study shows that the institutions plays as much of a vital role in retention as its student

body. While the student demographics may shift over time, the qualities of the institution are

likely to remain somewhat constant, creating an atmosphere of either positive or negative

retention (Bragg, 1976; Schartman & Rhee). To further this point, Berger (2001) found that

institutions of higher education must set a tone for how they will interact with members and with

the outside public. These methods, according to the author, of interaction with students, faculty,

staff, and the public, will create an environment in which students will be able to adapt to

situations or it will hinder their ability to progress. Hassel and Lourey (2005) assert that

institutions of higher education must provide more communication to students to enable them to

take control of their educational goals. These authors feel that persistence is largely determined

through a student's ability to take responsibility for their actions and performance within higher education. However, Hassel and Lourey point out that students are unable to make the decision to persist without clear guidelines as to how they are expected to progress. With these studies in mind, student interaction with the institution is vital, but is a less understood concept. The authors do little to explain how institutions work to serve the desires of students and what actions are performed to create ease of access to activities designed to aid students within the institutional system at each setting.

Faculty and Student Interaction

The interaction of faculty and students is important when considering persistence. College students interact with faculty on a regular basis during their coursework and rely upon these members of the institution to aid in their advancement during their academic careers. This section will focus on how the interaction between faculty and students relates to persistence. Careful attention will be paid, in this section, to the student perception of how faculty influence their decision to remain at a single institution. The literature which is presented represents selections which are most relevant to student persistence within the context of the population at MAC.

Types of Interactions. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that in traditional higher educational settings, faculty and students do not regularly interact outside of class time. The authors do note that this is not always the norm for "small and often selective liberal arts colleges" (p.393). According to Pascarella and Terenzini, there is no solid evidence to support the relationship between faculty and student interactions and persistence, but the authors do not assert that the two phenomena are unrelated. The authors suggest that students who do interact with faculty on a more frequent basis will likely adapt to the culture of the institution more

quickly and have a greater potential to connect life experience to the information presented in coursework. One of the most important points these authors make is that interactions with faculty may have some bearing on a student's desire to persist in higher education because the faculty members serve as role models for students who are unsure about their desire to persist towards degree attainment. It is of note that Pascarella and Terenzini focus on the faculty-student interaction as one which continues the learning process and not one which is social in nature. The authors recognize the potential benefits to the student socialization process which exist in social relationships but suggest that persistence is more positively affected through the propagation of the academic relationship outside of the classroom setting.

  Student Satisfaction. Cotton and Wilson (2006) which focus on student and faculty interactions at the undergraduate level and provides an alternate view of the importance of student-faculty relationships than the view presented by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). In this more recent study Cotton and Wilson found that students to not regularly interact with faculty during their undergraduate studies, suggesting that the phenomenon described in 1991 by Pascarella and Terenzini has continued. During their data collection Cotton and Wilson found that students who were in large, lecture style classes often did not interact with faculty at all. These students viewed faculty as teachers, and only spoke to these teachers to inquire about progress in courses or to solve administrative problems. A small amount of students who did interact with faculty on a regular basis noted that these interactions were important to them and helped the students form social networks on campus. The students who interacted with faculty reported that they were more satisfied with their overall academic experiences than students who did not have these types of interactions. The authors were careful to mention that increased academic learning was often not a component of faculty and student interactions in cases where

interactions were frequent, but that the students gained greater knowledge of the academic

setting and were more able adjust to the campus culture and less likely to have difficulties with

tasks such as registering for classes, deciding on and declaring a major, and finding on campus

work.

     Frequency. Koljatic and Kuh (2001) assert, in a study on the frequency of students

engaging in "good practices" (p.353), that the frequency of faculty and student interactions is not

increasing over time. This is a troubling finding when considering the decline in retention rates

over time. However, this does support the findings of both Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and

of Cotton and Wilson (2006) who both attest to the infrequent nature of faculty and student

interactions. Tinto (1975) also recognizes the infrequency of student and faculty interactions;

however he places this type of social relationship as one of the most important factors which

affect student persistence. Tinto's stance on student and faculty interactions describes

multilayered benefits to the student. This is to say that according to the author, students will

benefit both academically and socially. Students will also, according to Tinto, benefit to varying

degrees based upon the faculty with whom they interact, i.e. faculty who teach within the

student's chosen field of major will have a greater influence on the student's persistence. Tinto

and Pusser (2006) reinforce the influence held by faculty on student persistence. The authors

note that the type of interactions faculty engage in with students such as in class, outside of class,

student/faculty initiated interaction, and academic/social interaction, as well as the manner in

which faculty address students is directly related to student persistence. Tinto and Pusser also

stress the importance of ensuring that faculty are not only involved in student retention measures

undertaken by an institution of higher education but are also part of the planning process for

these types of programs as it is the faculty who are most often the face of the institution to the student body.

   Faculty Characteristics. Gardner (2008) also focuses on the importance of the student and faculty relationship, noting its influence on student persistence. This author mirrors the sentiment that places faculty as role models and representatives of the institution. Gardner also presents the issue of the faculty population not being representative of the student population at most institutions. This is a problem when considering gender and race as students are often not able to relate to their faculty mentors. This problem is also presented by Walsh, Larsen, and Parry (2009) who note that when students do not have mentors who are like them in gender and race they are far more likely to depart the institution. Jayakumar, Howard , and Allen (2009) also note that a diverse faculty population is more supportive of a diverse student population. When students view diverse faculty interactions and engage in personal interactions with faculty members who are diverse, the students are more likely to be accepting of peers who are not alike in gender and race.

   Yet another view of the influence faculty have on retention and persistence is, according to Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000), teaching methods. These authors view the type of teaching methods commonly employed by faculty as a rationale for the student desire to persist. Braxton, et al present the notion that the fewer lecture style courses presented to students, the more engaged students will feel and they will take an active role in their own learning. While these authors do not speak to faculty and student interactions outside the classroom setting, they share the notion of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) in that the more approachable the faculty are, the more likely students are to engage in conversation with these faculty and students will not only perform better in coursework but will become more engaged in their academic pursuits.

Hemanowicz (2004) found through his study of students at a highly selective institution that faculty who do not engage in conversations with students both during class time and outside of structured classes are often detrimental to student persistence. These faculty generally employ lecture methods during class time and have little interaction with students. This causes the students at these types of institutions to feel a disconnect between their academic goals and what they are presented in coursework. These students also reported that they felt faculty were not approachable and were not a source of assistance to their academic progress.

Faculty clearly have a direct influence on a student's desire to persist. The literature shows that faculty who serve as mentors and role models will aid their students in ensuring the desire to persist at a single institution of higher education. The faculty-student relationship also promotes a greater level of student access to information and aids in their academic decision making. Further, the faculty-student relationship decreases the likelihood of academic difficulties, both with administrative and education related issues.

Summary

It is clear that there is a large body of literature focused on both retention and persistence. Characteristics of institutions of higher education and of students are important when considering retention, but how these characteristics interact to influence *successful matriculation* is unclear. The examination of the concepts, retention and persistence, in a single study is necessary in order to gain an understanding of their relationship. Through this understanding of the interaction of persistence and retention institutions will be better able to meet the needs of students through programs and activities.

Chapter 3: Method

In order to understand retention from both the student and institutional perspective further research is needed. As shown in the review of literature, many theories exist which attempt to explain why students stay at an institution but few truly incorporate the views of both the institution and the students. This qualitative study enhances our understanding of student retention by investigating a small, less selective, liberal arts institution with a high retention rate. The study answers the following question: what are the dimensions of retention and persistence at a less selective institution with high retention? The two sub-questions which aid the answering the of primary research question are why do students return to the institution after the first year of study?; and what does the institution do to support student retention? The following diagram displays the path to completion of this study.
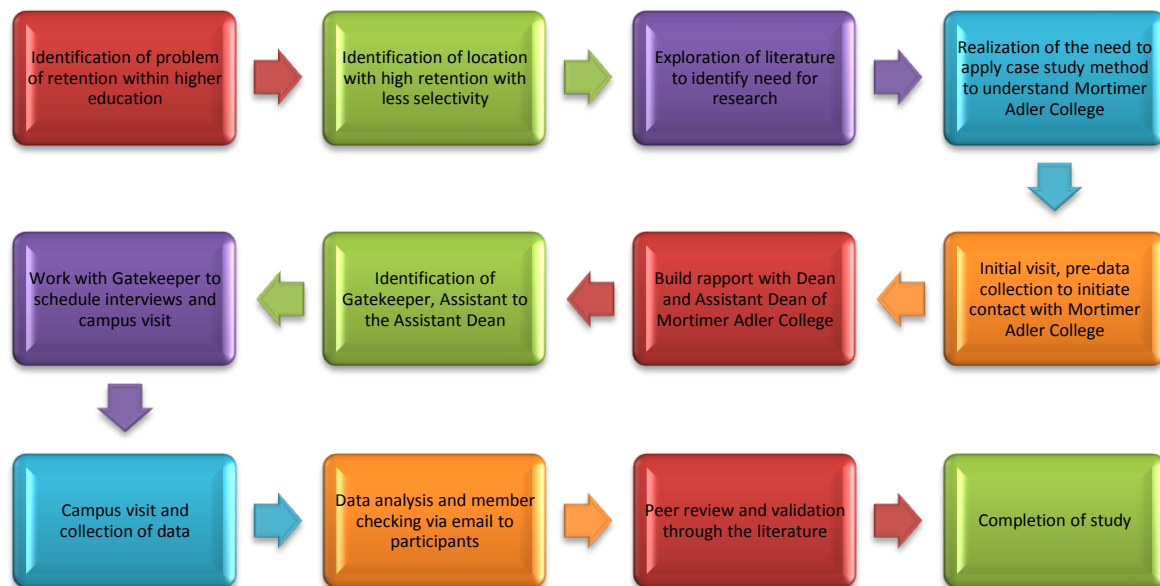
Figure 2. Path of the study from inception to completion.

Qualitative Paradigm

Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research through a number of criteria, all of which encompass the need to conduct research within a specific setting and allow the participants to offer data which is contextual and subjective. In order to understand the dimensions of retention and persistence and how these practices are perceived by faculty, staff, and students at one institution it is essential for this research to collect data within the setting and context of the campus community. Given the interaction of institutional practices and student choices, it is important to use qualitative methods to allow for the variation among participants (Creswell). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), the use of qualitative research methods allows for "many dimensions and layers" (p.133). The description of qualitative research provided by these authors speaks to the ability of the researcher to gain a deeper level of understanding of the situational characteristics of the problem, placing importance on the meaning of relationships and setting. Merriam (1998) further elaborates on the importance of using qualitative methods through a focus on the ability to allow the participants to have voice within the research. These methods will enable the thoughts and views of the participants to provide a deeper understanding of both retention and persistence at MAC. This method also allows the researcher to view the case as a whole, as opposed to in quantitative research which typically allows for only one point of view (Lichtman, 2006). The ability to view the issue of retention from its various aspects, campus setting, events, faculty, staff, and students allows for a greater level of understanding of how the target institution is able to sustain a high retention rate.

Case Study

A case study is used to examine institutional retention and student persistence. Creswell (2007) defines this method as the study of a problem based upon the responses of participants

who share common characteristics. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) note that case study can be used to understand the situational context of a set of practices in an exploratory fashion. The case study methods allows for the understanding of a situation in which the qualities are unique to the specific case and allows the researcher to focus on specific problems within this setting while maintaining the ability to view the case as a whole (Thomas, 2011). The case study method, according to Merriam (1998) also allows the researcher to compile various types of data such as documents, interviews, and observations in order to illustrate and understand the bounded case. For this study the culture of the institution is not the primary focus, though it needs to be understood in order to describe the setting. Observation was employed in order to understand the setting as well as to offer insight as to the common interactions among the population of students and institutional faculty and staff. Non-participant observations allowed the researcher to view the norms and habits of the population with minimal researcher influence (Creswell, 2009).

Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2009) and Lichtman (2006) it is vital for the researcher to disclose personal beliefs, biases, and experiences prior to conducting research in order to build trustworthiness. Further, these authors both assert that this disclosure not only sets the tone for the research, providing a basis for how the researcher will function within the setting, but also provides rationale for how the data is collected and interpreted. For this study I was not a participant. This allowed me to view activities at the institution with minimal researcher interference. As campus visits by potential students are a common occurrence researcher presence on campus and during class time did not cause disruption to the natural setting. I have no affiliation with the institution, but have identified this institution as successful in the area of retention. I worked to ensure that this bias, holding the belief that the institution's retention

practices are successful, was reduced during both data collection and analysis. There are

procedures within the institutional structure which are not successful in the goal of retaining

students or have no bearing on successful retention outcomes. Such practices which are not

successful are noted within the findings.

The Assistant Dean at Mortimer Adler College, Southwest was contacted prior to the

decision to select this institution as the proposed location of data collection. The Assistant Dean

was receptive to the endeavors of the study and is interested in the findings in order to better

understand their retention rates and potentially identify areas in need of improvement. While it

is important that the findings of the study be shared with institutional administrators, the

researcher worked to ensure that the role of researcher and not evaluator was maintained. The

researcher limited discussion with the Assistant Dean to data collection until the data analysis

was completed so that the role of researcher was maintained throughout the process.

I am a graduate of a private, non-religiously affiliated, urban university. The type of

institution attended by the researcher differs from MAC with respect to curriculum, selectivity of

students, and size. The experience of having attended a private university and my affinity for

this type of institution does affect the views I possess on the type of students who attend MAC. I

have visited the Southwest campus one time during the summer session, prior to data collection,

in an attempt to gather information about the institution but did not discuss topics relevant to this

proposed study.

Setting: Mortimer Adler College

As the methods employed by this institution are vastly different from those of traditional

institutions within the United States it is important to provide a detailed description of the

campus life, curriculum, and setting in order to provide understanding of the uniqueness of this

institution. Information presented in this section is gathered from institutional publications and

documents by independent published sources. The following table outlines the types of

marketing materials collected which served to provide information about the institution and were

used throughout the document analysis process.

Title	Description	Audience
Questions/Paradoxes	First marketing book received. Provides an overview of mission of the college, curriculum, campus locations, and finances.	Potential student and parents
Visit a college like no other.	Provides the rationale for campus visit along with information about activities at each campus location.	Potential student
Examined Lives	Provides information about liberal arts education, alumni achievements, and lists of graduate schools alumni have attended. Back page provides overview of admissions and costs.	Parents of potential students
Enduring Value	Cost of attendance and financial aid information.	Parents of potential students
Graduate Studies Brochure	History of the college, faculty bios, curriculum, alumni quotes	Potential graduate students
College website	Provides history of the college, faculty bios, campus information, curriculum, current information.	Current and potential students and parents

Table 2. Description of documents collected.

Research for the study took place at Mortimer Adler College at the Southwest campus.

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics the retention rate is 78%

(IPEDS, 2011). This rate compares to a national average rate of 76.0 and a rate for private small

liberal arts institutions of 75.8 (IPEDS, 2011). This institution has been chosen for its high

stable retention as well as for the unique qualities possessed by the institution which are thought

to possibly contribute to its high retention rate.

"Mortimer Adler College has two campuses 2,000 miles apart – but it is one college".

This paragraph will describe basic information about Mortimer Adler College presented in the

institution's marketing publications. The two campus locations of Mortimer Adler College are

located in the Northeast and Southwest United States. The Northeast location, which housed an

institution founded by the British monarchy, officially became Mortimer Adler College in 1784.

In 1964 the Southwest campus was founded in order to provide access to a larger student

population without increasing the size of the original campus. The institution claims no religious

affiliation and is accredited through the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and the American Academy of Liberal

Education. Each campus has approximately 500 students with one faculty member for every

eight students. The Southwest campus has 380 currently enrolled undergraduate students. All

undergraduates are full time students, of these 49% are female and 51% are male. The campus is

fairly racially homogenous, with 75% of students identifying as white. Most students are

traditionally aged, with 95% under the age of 24. Current tuition, fees, and living expenses total

$53, 806 per academic year (IPEDS, 2010). The two campuses are run by one college president

and follow the same methods for day to day administration and curriculum.

The college has no academic departments, and thus students do not choose a major of

study. Faculty work for the specific institutional location and teach courses across the

curriculum, regardless of previous education or work experience. All students take the same

courses on a prescribed schedule, with the only variation being short seminars which are offered

to third and fourth year students. These seminars are treated as electives and are not the same

length or format as traditional MAC courses. Every course is small, with fewer than 25 students,

and is discussion-based as opposed to lecture. Students are evaluated through oral assessment

and meet with faculty members at the end of each semester to determine the student's progress in

the coursework in a process which is called the "Don Rag". During the "Don Rag" students

meet individually with their faculty instructors at the end of each semester and engage in a

conversation with the faculty about the student's academic progress and are given suggestions

for improvement. All students receive a Bachelor's of Arts in Liberal Arts at the completion of

their studies. While students do take science and mathematics coursework, there are no options

to receive a Bachelor's of Science degree. All undergraduate students must be full-time students

unless they are granted a special waiver from the college, which is not a regular occurrence. The

majority of students live on campus at both locations.

Institutional Characteristics

Students are admitted to MAC based upon recommendations and interviews with faculty

and administrators. The institution has no requirements for test scores or high school

performance, though current students reported 620-720 on SAT Verbal and 570-680 on SAT

Math. 65% of current students receive financial aid from government and private loans as well

as the institution's grant programs. 82% of students live on campus in residence halls. There are

no Greek organizations at either campus; however both campuses host intramural sports and

numerous clubs and student organizations. Because both campuses follow the same academic

methods students may transfer between campuses as long as they are in good standing with the

institution and with the approval of deans of both locations.

The curriculum employed at MAC is the Great Books Curriculum, which is also known

as the Program. This curriculum format, made popular in the United States in the 1950's was

promoted by Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins (Casement, 2002). There are still several

higher education institutions in the United States who employ this method for all students and

hundreds who use some format within their liberal arts departments (Casement). Gans (2002)

states that though the readings prescribed by Adler and Hutchins have not changed since the

1950's, students respond well to the both the readings and the discussion based classes which

form the foundation of Great Books. The Great Books method employed by MAC follows very

closely to the original design in which students read specific texts in chronological order

(Casement, 2002). Through these texts students participate in discussion based courses which cover mathematics, science, foreign language, history, art, and music (Casement).

According to the promotional materials faculty members at MAC are referred to as *tutors* and each teaches a variety of courses regardless of their educational or professional background. Tutors can gain tenure and function similarly to instructors or professors at a traditional setting. The 19 tutors at the Southwest campus are varied in their disciplines of study, of these faculty members 16 hold a Ph.D. It is worth noting that faculty members do not necessarily teach courses in line with their field of study. The tutors provide student assessment based upon student performance in each course and are able to provide standard letter grades when requested by a student or for the purpose of providing transcripts.

Unlike the description of academic organizations by Bess and Dee (2008) MAC does not rely upon departments as a management system. Instead faculty members function as one liberal arts department. Faculty members are chosen through education or professional experience. Mortimer Adler College is unique in that it is a single institution with two locations on opposite sides of the country. There is no reference to First Year Experience programs and most extracurricular activities involve academics in some manner. The institution does promote frequent student interaction with faculty and as courses are discussion based, students are encouraged to interact with peers. The peer interaction is further reinforced by the large percentage of students who live on campus as well as by course activities which encourage students to participate in service events within the geographic areas of each campus. Most students do receive financial assistance, but further needs of students which are met by the institution which seem to support the high retention rate is unknown.

Data Collection

A variety of data was collected in an attempt to answer the research questions. According to Merriam (1998), the collection of different types of information, documents, interviews, and observations, will provide data to understand and interpret the chosen case. Data was collected during a one week visit to the campus. During this time all observations and interviews occurred. Member checking occurred via email following the one week on campus visit.

Observations occurred throughout the campus visit from 9:00 am until 6:00 pm each day and extended later as necessary. Class observations were minimally intrusive and took place during normal class time as allowed with the consent of the class instructor. The in class observations were scheduled through the office of Admissions in the same manner employed for campus visits by potential students. Courses observed were the evening Seminar, Freshman Ancient Greek, and Freshman Mathematics. Campus observations occurred during non-class times while students were present on campus and not in dorms. Campus observations occurred in high traffic areas, specifically the common area outside of the dining hall, in the campus coffee shop, in the library, and in the office of the Assistant Dean. The observations served to provide an understanding of student life on the campus. Observations, in the form of field notes, focused on the types of interactions which could be identified without researcher interference specifically how students interact with administrators, faculty, staff and other students during and outside of class time. Observations were in the form of structured observations, as described by Thomas (2011) during which the researcher looked for specific interactions among institutional members and for events which occurred to support institutional retention efforts.

Documents in the form of institutional promotional materials and any materials free and accessible to institutional members were collected and kept for consideration during the data analysis process. These documents served to either support or refute data collected during the interview process as well as to provide a description of the setting of the institution. Documents were coded following interview coding.

Interviews took place on campus, during the one week visit. The career services library was made available for the majority of student and faculty interviews. One faculty member chose to be interviewed in the campus coffee shop and another chose to be interviewed in his office. All administrators were interviewed in their own offices. The assistant to the assistant dean, i.e. dean of students, served as gatekeeper and helped identify students, staff members and faculty who were willing to participate in interviews. Recruitment emails were sent to the gatekeeper who then forwarded these emails to individuals fitting the requirements of the study. Respondents to the emails were then chosen in the order in which reply emails were received and scheduled based upon availability of the individual to participate in interviews during the planned visit. The sample of students is comprised of currently enrolled students who are in their second or third year of study. Eight students were chosen based on willingness to participate. All students are traditional students, first-time, full-time enrollment, who entered the chosen institution within one year of completion of high school. Four faculty members were selected using the same selection method as used for student selection. The sample of two college administrators is comprised of current employees within the office of student affairs and admissions. The dean and assistant dean were also interviewed in order to provide further data regarding retention efforts as well as to provide clarity in description of setting.

Student participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix A) along with a letter of consent (Appendix G). The student questionnaire was used to collect demographic data about the participants. Student participants were then interviewed using the student interview protocol (Appendix B). This interview was developed by the researcher based upon review of literature relevant to student persistence. The interview protocol was pilot tested, using a population of current college students at another institution, to ensure reliability. The student interview is semi-structured in form and functioned to gather student perceptions of persistence (Boeije, 2010).

Faculty and staff participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix C) and were given a letter of consent prior to participation. Similar to the student questionnaire, demographic data was collected about each participant. Faculty and staff participants were interviewed with the use of researcher developed interviews (Appendices D and E). All interviews were tested during a pilot study conducted during Spring 2011. The pilot study allowed for the further development of the interview protocols which enabled the researcher to refine the interview process. At the end of the one week visit, the dean and assistant were interviewed using the administrator interview protocol (Appendix F). The dean and assistant dean were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) prior to the interview. This interview occurred after the student, staff, and faculty interviews in an attempt to minimize bias caused by the views of the dean and assistant dean.

Participants

The following chart provides an overview of the participants highlighting their most

prominent characteristics.

Participant	Protocol	Years at MAC	Unique Characteristic
Gatekeeper	N/A	N/A	Alumni. Is a primary contact for students and admin
Student 1 (Female)	Student	2.5 years	1st Generation student
Student 2 (Male)	Student	2.5 years	Transferred from Northwest campus after 1st year
Student 3 (Female)	Student	1.5 years	Is a member of a non-academic club on campus
Student 4 (Female)	Student	2.5 years	Identifies friends only through academic association
Student 5 (Male)	Student	2.5 years	Has family members who live in same town as MAC
Student 6 (Female)	Student	1.5 years	Lives off campus with several MAC alumni
Student 7 (Male)	Student	1.5 years	Has an off campus internship
Student 8 (Female)	Student	2.5 years	International student from Zimbabwe
Tutor 1 (Female)	Faculty	5 months	New hire, was recruited by current faculty
Tutor 2 (Male)	Faculty	14 years	Alumni, lives on campus as a Senior Resident
Tutor 3 (Male)	Faculty	23.5 years	Alumni, left law career to return to MAC
Tutor 4 (Female)	Faculty	1.5 years	Is a senior resident, regularly brings child on campus
Administrator 1 (F)	Staff	3 years	Is very active with Ladies Lunch for women at MAC
Administrator 2 (M)	Dean	9 years	Is an administrator and a tutor. Also an alumni
Administrator 3 (M)	Dean	12 years	Is an administrator and a tutor.
Administrator 4 (M)	Staff	5.5 years	Alumni. Very involved with students.

Table 3. Overview of Participants

Data Analysis

The primary analysis methods which were employed for the proposed study are those

prescribed by Boeije (2010). Recordings were transcribed within one week of interview. All

recordings were digital and were stored in password protected files. Transcripts of interviews

with administrators, faculty, and students were grouped by participant type and treated

separately. The interviews were separated by participant type in order to identify the key areas

of student need and institutional actions so that areas of overlap can be viewed once themes were

derived from the data. Transcripts were divided into segments, based upon key concepts

identified within the review of literature and coded using MaxQDA data analysis software. This

software provided ease in cataloging data and enabled identification of common themes within

the transcripts. Open and axial coding methods as described by Boeije were employed in order

to analyze the data. Observation and interview notes were stored in a locked file cabinet. These

notes were used to provide contextual support of themes found in interview data. Observation

and interview notes were be used to provide clear and detailed description of the setting.

Institutional documents were analyzed in order to identify specific examples of retention

supportive activities. Primary analysis consisted of the search for common themes and for areas

of disagreement among administrator, faculty, and student interviews.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were given a copy of a letter of consent (Appendix D) prior to engaging

in interviews. This letter was also provided to faculty members who allowed in class

observations as well as to all students in the classroom. Participants were provided full

knowledge of the type of data to be collected during observations and interviews and were

allowed to stop data collection at any time should they not wish to continue participation.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) identify the importance of protecting the privacy of participants.

With this in mind, the researcher will provide anonymity to participants through pseudonyms and

the omission of identifying characteristics.   Names of participants will not be used and

demographic information will be collected to ensure that participants fit the demographic criteria

necessary for the study, time at the institution, traditionally aged student, and full time student.

Participants were informed of their right to request transcripts of the interviews and are allowed

to comment on data for clarity purposes as they deem necessary.

Validation

Methods of validation employed are those detailed by Boeije (2010). Once a list of

themes was derived from the data the themes presented in a narrative form were sent via email to

participants to ensure that the themes accurately portray the setting and situation at the target

institution. This process of member checking ensures that themes are a representation of the case

and not the sole view of the researcher. The same narrative was sent to two other individuals

who are knowledgeable about higher education, specifically retention to complete a peer review

process. The review of literature provides triangulation of data to ensure that the proper types of

themes are derived from the data. Observational data were used to validate or refute the data

gathered from interviews. The description of analysis includes direct quotes from participants to

provide further rationale for the themes presented.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter will describe the themes which emerged from the data. All forms of data were used in the identification and support of these themes, interview, observation, and documents. First, the topic of *social life* will be presented, followed by a section discussing *academic themes*. This section will cover all aspects of the academic life which form both positive and negative impacts on retention. The third section which will be presented is *community* and finally *student life* will be examined. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the findings and themes within the entire context of Mortimer Adler College.

Reflections on Visit to Campus

The campus is set on a mountain in a predominately residential area. There is a museum, a convent, and an elementary school within one mile of the campus, but the surrounding area is populated by large houses. During the time of the visit there was a moderate snow storm, which left snow on the ground, though the snow was always plowed from campus streets and shoveled from walkways before my arrival to campus each morning. It was easy to discern when students were in class as the campus common areas would be clear of students during these times. When students were not in class they would gather outside the bookstore/dining hall building and were sometimes accompanied by faculty members who would bring instruments and encourage students to join in playing music outside the building. The campus grounds were very well manicured and there was never trash on the ground. This lack of even the smallest amount of debris or fallen leaves was startling at first but throughout my time on campus I observed a small group of students who walked around the campus with brooms and shovels and would stop to clean up any trash or fallen leaves they passed. These students would set their books down and clean an area between class times.

Another startling observation was the lack of technology. That is not to say that there are no computers on campus as there were computers in all faculty and staff offices as well as in the career services library where interviews were held. Students had cell phones, but did not walk around with laptops nor did they bring laptops to study groups or into the coffee shop. There were also no iPads or ereaders, all students used paper copies of books and took notes in notebooks or on paper tablets. When I asked each student for their email address to contact them after the campus visit they all were able to provide email addresses, some were College email addresses while others were personal email addresses, but most students said that they did not check email daily. Students also spoke about handing in assignments in printed form, emailing assignments was never mentioned.

Mortimer Adler College also seems to show a preference for chalk boards as opposed to the dry erase boards which are most often seen in college classrooms today. There were chalk boards in each classroom, in faculty offices, and even in the coffee shop. Students are encouraged to use these chalkboards and in the coffee shop the boards were covered in writing which related to coursework, not drawings or notes to others.

Another startling absence is the lack of posters and flyers. There were no flyers posted on doors or walls. Most events are publicized through word of mouth, not through flyers posted around campus. There were also no newspapers, though there were racks of local publications which provided calendars of events in town.

Many students had College logo water bottles and book bags. They seemed very proud to be students of the College, but there were no signs of school colors or a mascot of any type. Students were always dressed very casually, some girls did wear high heels, but this was minimal possibly due to the snow. Even though most students live on campus students did not

come to morning classes in pajamas, each clearly had their own style. Quite a few students had colorfully dyed hair; I observed green, blue, and pink. Styles of dress did not seem specific to groups, often there were a variety of styles in one group. An important observation regarding gathered groups of students is that the groups were very fluid, students would join and depart regularly and all students seemed to interact with the same level of friendliness.

The movement of students seemed more akin to a high school, where the campus common areas clear quickly when classes are in session but fill again quickly when class time ends. The lack of technology was surprising as was the lack of flyers and posters advertising events on campus. Finally, the lack of cliques was notable; all students seemed to interact well with all other students, regardless of style or age.

The description presented sets the context for a college which is unlike traditional American institutions of higher education. When considering themes which emerged from the data collected it is important to keep in mind the unique qualities of the setting. Although the setting is unique the findings are still important when considering the improvement of retention and persistence.

The Integration of Social and Academic Life

While most of the activities discussed by campus members are academic in nature, discussions held outside of class time are viewed as social exchanges, even if the topics are a continuation of course material. There are two main types of social interaction at Mortimer Adler College, in class and outside of class interaction. The in class interaction is reinforced through the discussion based class sessions which are part of the seminar teaching method employed by the institution. The outside of class social interactions occur most often in the form of study groups, which are initiated primarily by either faculty or students. These study groups

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vary in topic, ranging from topics which are directly related to coursework, i.e. Ancient Greek, to

topics which are not derived from the curriculum, i.e. Fairy Tales. The study groups which are

not derived from the curriculum are still very academic in nature, the Fairy Tale group discusses

not only stories in this genre but also their creation and evolution, thus the group functions as if it

was an academic endeavor though the participants view this interaction as purely social. This is

unique in that the desire for the continuation of academic discussions is largely student driven.

The following table provides an outline for a typical day provided by one student

participant.

Time	Activity
8:20	Wake up and get ready for the day
9:00-10:30	First class
10:30-11:30	Go to the library to do homework for an hour
11:30-12:30	Eat lunch
12:30-1:30	Go back to the library to do more work
1:30-3:00	Second Class
3:00-5:00	Go back to the library to finish seminar reading
5:00-6:00	Eat dinner
6:00-7:00	Free time to relax
7:15-7:30	Go to seminar room to get ready for class
7:30-9:30	Seminar class
9:30-10:00	Go to coffee shop to talk with classmates about class
10:00-11:00	Return to dorm room to finish homework
11:00-12:30/1:00	Free time to watch TV
12:30/1:00	Go to sleep

Table 4. Schedule for an average day of one student participant.

As shown by Table 3 the majority of the student's day is filled with academic endeavors. The

student did mention that often study time and homework time was spent with other students.

Students are enrolled in five courses per semester, thus each day will offer some variation in

times of activities.

During campus observations what often looked like a group of students having a social

exchange often was, upon closer examination, a discussion about academic topics. These

interactions often appeared to be purely social and while the method of conversation was often far less formal than the discussion style used during class time, the topics were often the same as in class or very similar. One such occasion was on a Monday, during the middle of the day, a group of students were gathered outside of the building which houses the bookstore, coffee shop, and dining hall. This building is fairly centrally located on campus and has an open, paved area in front with several benches all around. A group of eight students were gathered around the benches closest to the door, all smoking cigarettes and having conversations amongst each other. From a distance these students seemed to be having casual conversations, laughing and joking with one another. Closer observation revealed that the students were discussing what had occurred during their various classes and talking about the books they were reading for class. As time went on and various students began to depart, each made plans with another member or members of the group to engage in study time later that evening. The following illustration displays the types of social academic interactions which occur regularly on campus:
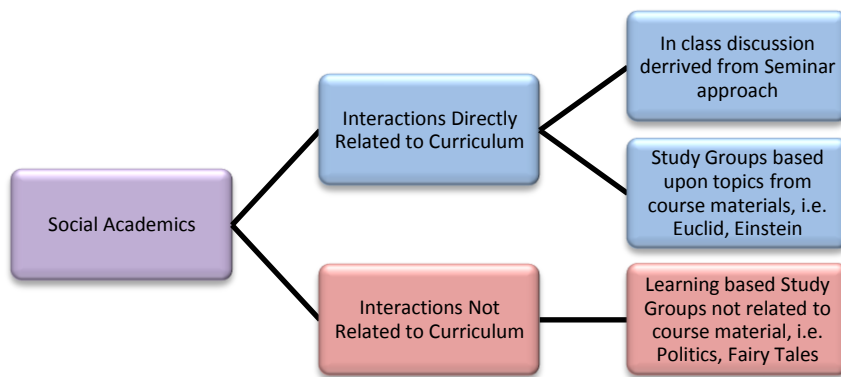
Figure 3. Social Academic Interaction Types

Interviews with students revealed a campus culture in which academics is intertwined with life in general. Students rarely separate academic life from social life and even on campus parties often have literary themes such as the yearly Faust party. One student explained her view of activities as:

> All those are kind of the same thing. Which I guess is why I'm confused by the question friends. Cause that sounds like there's something outside, curriculum and academics, and social life are for me at least all done in the classroom at the same time, so I guess they all made me stay.

While this student does participate in activities outside of class time, most of the activities she participates in are academic in nature. This type of response was common, as all other students interviewed also linked social and academic activities in some way. Students provided lists of activities which were primarily academic in subject matter. The most commonly mentioned activity is the study group, which are numerous in quantity and are formed to discuss various topics, though all are academic in nature.

The culture of social academics creates a natural link between life and academics for students. This sense of unified social and academic life allows for students to become involved in extracurricular activities and thus become a part of the community early on in their enrollment as the study groups are both a venue for academic assistance as well as a way to incorporate topics outside of the curriculum. This is similar to Tinto's (1993) view that students who are both academically integrated within the environment and socially integrated into the campus culture are more likely to be retained; at MAC these two realms, academic and social are one in the same. One student spoke about fulfilling his need to study politics and to identify other members of the college who share an interest in politics, through participation in a study group:

…the most fun I have is with the foreign policy discussion group and basically we just

read articles that are mostly current events and that's a great, it's still up here it's still in

the mind but its current it's not ancient. And actually that's one of the with the risk of

saying something critical here - is that a lot of the people at the school aren't very, I mean

they're political but you kind of try to strike up conversations with people and a lot of

them won't be very aware of what's going on.

The student provides a rationale for finding methods of pursuing personal interests which are not

part of the Mortimer Adler College curriculum in a manner which is both social and academic.

These study groups can, for some students, help to identify people who have common

interests and can work to form a social network among students. This method of creating an

active student body, through the support of student driven extracurricular activities, is a method

to aid students in adapting to the environment. The academic intensity of the Great Books

Curriculum is made to seem natural in a system where students are accustomed to thinking and

talking about academic topics as a common social interaction.

This culture of social academics at MAC is supportive of retention in that the students

experience a high level of focus on academics and view this focus as both an educational

experience and a social experience. What is most interesting is that the social focus on

academics seems to come naturally to students. There are other activities on campus which are

not academically focused, such as soccer club, pottery club, and structured exercise groups, but

these activities are less mentioned by students. Even during non structured interactions, such as

students spending time together between classes, conversations tend to focus on academics. This

is in line with the Bean and Eaton (2002) study which suggests that students who identify a

support group which enables them to focus on their academic efforts will be more likely to be

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retained by the institution. The formation of social connections which are closely tied to academic work by MAC students might aid in their ability to overcome the academic intensity of the curriculum as academic work becomes an extension of their social lives in some sense.

Academic Themes

Academics is a way of life at Mortimer Adler College, providing both an intellectual and social outlet for students. When considering retention, the level of academic integration for students which is supported by the College is extremely high (Tinto, 1993). On the persistence side of the successful matriculation issue, students are able to recognize a clear path to completion, can identify peers with common interests, and can easily identify mentors to aid them through their academic struggles. Persistence at MAC can be related to Astin's (1991) Talent Model, in which students self-select into an institution of higher education and feel a sense of determination to continue on their chosen path. The themes presented within this section provide an answer to the question of how institutional efforts and student goals and needs work to influence retention at Mortimer Adler College.

Curriculum is a central focus

The Great Books Curriculum is a draw for students who are interested in reading the set list of books. Students self-select into this College and thus choose to follow the Great Books Curriculum. One of the most prevalent sentiments among all participants is that the curriculum type is the deciding factor for most students. MAC students are those who want to participate in the Great Books Curriculum also called the Program by College members, and have an interest in the literature presented by the curriculum prior to beginning their studies. This personal interest is often felt prior to the discovery of MAC as a potential college of interest for students.

Students tend to feel that once they have discovered MAC they have found the perfect college. One student describes the experience of discovering MAC through the realization that the specific curriculum, not other college characteristics, was in line with her interests:

> I remember thinking "I want to read all these books anyway so I might as well go to a school that will let me just read all of these books"…reading through their program statement I was just like "this is awesome; I'm really frustrated with reading secondary, tertiary materials".

The student mentioned the College program statement in reference to the description of the Great Books Curriculum which is included in most of the marketing materials. An administrator mirrored this sentiment, expanding on the rationale of the student desire to continue their enrollment due to the nature of the Curriculum:

> So if anything it might seem arbitrary to have it (the Program) end at a certain point, but there's no reason why after 2 years you'd think "well I loved what I got out of Plato and Euclid and Dante and Descartes, but I don't think I'm going to love what I get out of Newton or Kant or Hegel or Einstein" so there's no, if you came here for the right reasons and the Program is opening up for you it's natural to want to see it through.

This administrator also highlighted another clear draw of the Great Books Curriculum by alluding to its linear nature. The Great Books Curriculum is intended to provide understanding of the development of current thought through the study of literature in chronological order. This sentiment was referred to throughout the campus tour and is noted throughout MAC literature. The curriculum has remained relatively fixed since its adoption in the late 1930's, changing only slightly in the 1950's. This stability allows for students to know exactly the order of the Curriculum and which books will be studied during each course, which follows the

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method called for by Hassel and Lourey (2005) to aid students in successful progression to degree attainment through clear goals and open communication as to how to reach milestones. Further, the existence of only one program of study does not allow for differences among student studies with regard to discipline of choice. As all choice is removed each student progresses at the same rate over the same period of time.

Some students did feel that revisions to the Great Books Curriculum might help to better meet the needs of students. While the Curriculum is something that is highly regarded by all members and very highly protected by the population of MAC, some students felt that it is lacking in some regards. There is a lack of contemporary subject matter in the curriculum; students must seek, independently, other ways to infuse contemporary subject matter into their learning. One student highlighted the need for more current material to be made available on campus:

> And for me kind of growing up in a liberal household I wasn't just reading books I was reading newspapers I was reading now it's kind of websites and stuff and blogs but that's one thing I would say that's kind of lacking here is that there's not newspapers around college it's not very up to date.

This student provides a criticism of the Great Books Curriculum noting that there is no contemporary subject matter within the curriculum. Students who want to study contemporary events must seek study groups to fulfill this need.

There is also a sense that students do not receive enough academic assistance with writing. This is something that is concerning for the students as all students interviewed expressed a desire to attend graduate school once they had completed their studies at MAC. This sentiment is also very troubling as students do not take tests and receive grades base primarily

upon class participation and papers written for their courses. A student participant explained the lack of in class focus on the writing process:

> That being said, I would like a larger focus on writing, right now I can get by writing a one draft paper for a most important paper and I know I can get by doing that because the other students in my class cannot write. So it's considered a very good paper in comparison and that's very frustrating. There are a lot of students that need help writing. I would like more help writing. I would like to be forced to write more.

A major part of the completion of the curriculum requires that students, as seniors write papers on a topic of their choice as related to the overall curriculum they have studied. Even with the intense focus on writing as an assessment tool, students feel that they do not receive enough instruction to assist them in becoming better writers.

Lack of contemporary information and lack of emphasis on writing techniques, through the lack of traditional English composition coursework, are detrimental to successful matriculation and cause some students to question their enrollment at Mortimer Adler College. To ensure successful matriculation of all students MAC should make attempts to address areas of student need within the Curriculum which can be remedied without a departure from Great Books. A greater focus on writing would aid the students in rationalizing their liberal arts education as vital to future success as it would provide a concrete benefit. Also some focus on contemporary subject matter could be infused into course discussions to provide students with an understanding of how the Great Books coursework can be related to the current world and the real lives of the students.

Structure is essential to the MAC way of life

The Great Books Curriculum, according to the College website is designed to possess an inherent sense of structure. The structure is extremely rigid and does not allow for individual choice. In this atmosphere every student takes the same courses in the same order. This structure impacts retention in both positive and negative ways. This section will present both the positive and negative impacts of structure on retention at Mortimer Adler College as well as how the positive and negative forces interact.

The positive side of structure. The positive sentiment to the structure and rigidity felt by students at Mortimer Adler college is voiced by one student:

> Since the school here is so structured it's almost less of a transition than it would be to go to a major college because you're kind of required to live on campus and so there's that structure, you know you have a place to live and you have food to eat and so and the classes, you don't have to pick your classes and in that way its less of a transition, it's easier, its more similar to high school...

Many of the students voiced opinions similar to this student, indicating that the removal of choice of courses, choice of major, and choice of class times made the atmosphere similar to a traditional high school setting. Students do not, at MAC, select course times, instead they are given a schedule each semester. The students do have some amount of flexibility with this schedule which is explained by an administrator:

> There's very strict policies or rules that I follow to let someone transfer classes, they are allowed to in the fall semester, remember these are whole year classes, in the fall semester in the first week they can go to the registrar without coming to me and request to change a class, after the first week they have to come to me. Once they do that the

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threshold gets a lot harder, I want to know why, I want to see if it's legitimate, I decide if

it's legitimate. After a certain point, except for very special reasons, I don't allow

transfers at all. In the spring semester there are extremely few transfers and they are

usually prefigured by extensive complaints about the dynamic in the classroom their

ability to get their work done in the previous semester and they just come back and they

still can't make it work, but those are very few students, I've let maybe, I've let a handful

of students transfer this semester, maybe five or six.

The administrator describes transferring of courses in the sense that a student may change the

time the course is taken, but still must take the same course. Transfers, as stated by the

administrator are generally preceded by student complaints. Some transfers do occur when a

student's schedule is deemed unbalanced, such as those with a majority of classes on a single day

or if a student has a late class followed by an early morning class.

In this sense the structure is removing the need to adapt to a new type of educational

atmosphere. Students are given a schedule, and do not need to obtain a course catalog and select

courses to take to fit a specific discipline. Likewise there is some choice within the curriculum

during their Junior and Senior years. During this time students are offered "preceptorials" which

are seven-week mini-courses designed by the tutors focusing on literature outside of the set

curriculum or a deeper focus on curriculum literature. Students are able to select the precept

they would like to take allowing choice for both subject matter and instructor.

The negative side of structure. The positive aspects of the rigid structure, i.e. similarity

to high school and lack of course scheduling complications, of the curriculum at MAC in some

ways also work against retention. The primary hindrance to students is due to of choice in

coursework as described by one tutor:

One kid we lost who was really bright, I heard he went to a music program, it was kind of a sad thing because I think he was really sharp and really good in seminar, his papers were good, he was smart, and I think his Greek was really good. I think one thing we could do is, we have really high achieving kids but we give them so much work and so much of their time is spent in the classroom that they have no time to pursue things that they're interested in… and if they *do* it compromises their schoolwork because there's so much of it and so it puts them in this really stressful position.

This tutor's statement shows a concern that because the Great Books Curriculum is so structured it removes the possibility of students to specialize in an area of interest. The rigidity and academic intensity of the Curriculum are areas which concerned participants at all levels of the institution.

The lack of choice and the lack of ability to specialize are detrimental to retention as evidenced by the sentiment that if a student wishes to specialize in a specific discipline the student should depart the institution. This knowledge of lack of choice provides rationale for why the retention rate at Mortimer Adler College would likely never reach 100%, and also highlights the success of the College given that even with lack of choice retention is still higher than average. All students are working towards a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts. Many students voiced the concern of not knowing what they would do after completing their studies at MAC. There were also many stories from students, faculty, and administrators about individuals who had been MAC students but had left to pursue a more specialized degree. It is of note to point out that these losses are viewed as a positive. Students who are not retained feel the need to focus on a specific discipline are encouraged to do so and are viewed as a success as highlighted by an administrator:

…he started at MAC, after two years he decided that he wanted to be a serious classicist, he went to Harvard and graduated from Harvard with classics, a classics degree, went to graduate school, got his Ph.D., and then came back as a faculty member. Now do we view that as a failure? I mean this is somebody who obviously was deeply shaped by the college loved it to the degree that he wanted to devote the rest of his life to it but after two years here and weighing it, thought that he wanted to do that kind of intensive work with Greek and Latin that couldn't do here and he thought he'd gotten the seeds of how to take ownership of his own education and I view that as a real success for us…

While students departing the institution to pursue other academic endeavors are viewed as a success by MAC it is still detrimental to the institutional retention rate. Due to MAC's commitment to the Great Books Curriculum and the lack of desire to change or adjust the Curriculum it seems that the natural inclination is to view those who depart to pursue academics through a different curricular method is positive rather than viewing this as a loss of a student. The view that students should leave if their academic needs are not met along with statements by all administrators that they are "agnostic" with regards to retention figures suggests that the methods of calculating retention which are currently in use should be reevaluated to better meet the needs of students not simply the enrollment numbers at an institution.

There is also a high level of academic intensity associated with the structure of the Great Books Curriculum. The academic intensity is one of the elements which faculty and staff attribute to the loss of students, though there is no true desire to alter the Curriculum to make it easier for students. The sentiment is that students self-select into the college and some students may find that they are not ready for this type of experience. The desire is that these students may

take some time off and return to MAC to pursue a degree at a later date. One student described

the problems students experience due to the intense nature of the Curriculum:

> MAC, if you let it will consume you. I mean not speaking metaphorically, a kid went
>
> crazy last year, at the end of my sophomore year before spring break, he literally had a
>
> mental breakdown. This place will do things to you if you aren't guarded in a certain
>
> way. And so I think one of the things about, that is very important about know about
>
> MAC before you come into it is that you have to be a strong person on your own before
>
> trying to attempt running through all these different ideas that are a lot of them are
>
> contradictory to each other. So I think it takes a very strong person to stay here all 4
>
> years, particularly to stay here all 4 years without taking any time off.

Many students take time off from the college then return at a later date. This is seen as a positive

occurrence and is often encouraged by faculty and administrators. Students who are able to

complete within four years are seen as those who are incredibly high achieving.

The interaction of positive and negative forces of structure. The lack of flexibility in

coursework is reconciled through the availability of resources for students to create clubs and

other extracurricular activities which are supported by the institution. Students are provided with

meeting spaces, faculty assistance, and financial assistance to create study groups and clubs

which work to fill the gaps in the Curriculum. The view which is shared by all members is that

if students want a specific activity or want to study a specific discipline or text then they can

form a club or group to fulfill this need which will be supported by MAC. While the availability

of extracurricular activities is vast, there is no method to reconcile the clear lack of a broader

range of disciplines and formal sports as voiced by an administrator:

In many cases staying here means not majoring in something they'd be majoring in or not

preparing professionally for something that they might be elsewhere. So they certainly

feel the strain, and that leads some of them to leave.

Another administrator also spoke to the lack of choice with regards to discipline:

For the students for whom this is not right, it's really not right… they can't change their

major. I mean that's what happens at my college, where I went,…if they started out pre-

med or something like that and they realized that wasn't going to work out they change

their major, they don't go to another school, here you don't have that choice.

There is an acknowledgement of the need for other courses to prepare students for some

type of profession and according to both students interviewed, campus tour information,

marketing materials, as well as career center resources the College supports students taking

summer coursework at other institutions to fulfill these needs. Often students enroll in summer

coursework at traditional colleges and universities or engage in internships to enhance their

learning. These activities are supported by MAC through assistance in securing finances and

internship opportunities.

With regards to academic intensity, students recognize that the Great Books Curriculum

is difficult and that the teaching methods employed at Mortimer Adler College are extremely

stressful. Students view overcoming the academic intensity as an achievement and want to

persist despite the lack of choice and the great amount of demands placed on them. Ultimately

the academic intensity is viewed as a worthwhile means to reach the end of the Curriculum as

voiced by one student:

Because as Dante's Inferno says, "one must go through hell to get to heaven". When I

say that it was hell, and it was hell, it was a wonderful hell. I think hell can be a very

beautiful place which is what it turned out to be, it sort of destroys you completely and in

that sort of destruction you see things. I don't know how to describe it it's almost like

this - I mean I could liken it to a religious experience or just the people that stay are

intellectual sadists.

This student highlighted the high level of stress and academic intensity involved in being a

Mortimer Adler College student. It is important to note that while many of the student

participants spoke of a high level of stress and talked about feeling depressed or unhappy due to

the academic intensity of the Curriculum all of them also spoke about feeling a sense of

accomplishment through overcoming the academic difficulties.

Everyone as teacher and learner.

The style of teaching which is most prevalent and most accepted is a style which allows

students to guide class sessions. This allows students a great deal of flexibility in how they will

interpret the course material as well as the amount of material they will cover in a course. The

ability to guide the classroom sessions allows students to fulfill their need to connect with course

material as emphasis is placed on points of student interest, not instructor interest. The teaching

style employed at Mortimer Adler College is extremely beneficial to persistence as it allows

students to have a majority of the control over their own learning. The teaching style also

removes the classroom hierarchy which is common in most academic settings. It is evident,

when observing the MAC classroom setting, that students are encouraged to guide their own

learning. This is most clearly seen during the evening Seminar courses. The Seminar class

observed was a freshmen class of 16 students and two tutors. The class had been assigned to

read a section of Plato's Meno and the topic of discussion was views of love presented within

their assigned reading. One of the tutors began the session by reading a sonnet by Shakespeare

and questioned the students about love based upon the sonnet and the assigned readings. Students then engaged in a discussion to work through the question posed. The students were able to adhere to a sense of structure, allowing each person to finish a statement before another student would speak. There was no hand raising or calling on students to speak for the first half of the class. Later once all ideas had been presented the tutors would take turns challenging each idea and allowing students to continue the conversation based upon the new prompts such as asking how the horses which pull the chariot in the passage relate to love. It is clear that the students develop a high level of critical thinking skills as they were able to infuse not only history and literature into the conversation, but also religion, sociology, and psychology. The Seminar class was not the only example of this type of learning, other classes observed, Freshmen Math and Ancient Greek, shared the same basic format, of letting students guide the conversation. The math and language tutors did attempt to keep the students closer to the specific topic than in the Seminar course, but students were able to cite sources from other courses and present ideas as they deemed necessary. There is a perception by the students that they are able to control the direction of their courses and in many ways this shows true. One student participant described how students can change the nature of a course:

…you can influence what you talk about in class instead of having a sheet handed to you. In my language class this year we were focused less on translation and more on talking about what we were reading, Oedipus Rex. It's a Greek language class so part of the class we would do some translation part of the class we'd talk about the book as a whole like we would in seminar. But our class focused more on talking about the book as a whole

The other norm for students is asking for help. This is something that is accepted and in no way ridiculed or looked down upon. During the math class, students were reading Euclid and

attempting to draw the propositions presented in their text. These were very complicated as the text gives only a written explanation of each proposition and students must discern the meaning and create a picture to represent the selection. The class was working on lines in multiple planes and students clearly were attempting to successfully execute the drawings. The tutor called students to draw by randomly pulling index cards with each student's name written on a card. One student was called and attempted a drawing, he realized that he was not able to complete the drawing and told the class he was confused and needed help to finish the proposition. At this point another student went up to the board with the first student and together they worked out how to complete the drawing. The two students took turns with the chalk, each completing the segment they understood until the drawing was completed. At no time did the tutor interfere in this process, allowing the students to assist each other.

Each tutor has their own style, but there is a view that the tutor is the more knowledgeable participant in the room, but not the expert and not the facilitator of the conversation. One tutor participant described the importance of maintaining the view of tutors as participants, not teachers even after teaching the same course multiple times:

I have gone through it (specific coursework) four or five times and so it's not new to me, it *is* new to them. On the other hand I know that its fraudulent for me to pretend to be an expert cause I'm not, I'm just a step and a half ahead of them, or a couple of steps ahead of them. So I do feel that on the other hand it's best for me, and I know it's best for them, when I can put them in a place where they are animatedly discussing back and forth among themselves. Even if I see that they're going in a direction that I know doesn't work it's better to let them go there. It's true that now I'm in a position to be condescending towards that. But it happens on a regular basis.

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Tutors are hired with the expectation that they will teach all courses offered by the college. This means that at some point each tutor will teach in an area they are not familiar with. This is viewed as a good thing as the tutor and the students will learn the material together. This does cause some frustration for students who, at times, would rather have someone who could readily offer an answer to a question than someone who will work through the question with the group. However, this method allows for all members of the community to go through the same experience of coming to terms with learning subject matter which is unfamiliar to them. This culture of viewing everyone as a learner not only aids in the socialization of students who are able to identify mentors who share common experiences but also creates an atmosphere of support. The teaching style and the view the all members of Mortimer Adler College are learners is a primary component of successful matriculation. The institution, primarily faculty, relate to students through a common struggle to understand coursework. The students adapt to a setting where all are equals and peers are sources of support.

Campus Community as a Support Group

…one of the things that really makes the community strong here which was unexpected to me is that all the required curriculum and many of the staff members have done either the undergraduate program or the graduate program or they're doing it. And so we read the same thing year after year after year so someone in this office might say to a student what are you reading for seminar tonight and there's an automatic bond because we've read it ... (Administrator)

The campus community at Mortimer Adler College is incredibly strong and is supportive of all members. Students are able to seek mentorship from faculty, staff, and other students and feel comfortable interacting with all members of the institution. This level of community

interaction is in line with the best practices related to retention and persistence noted in Chapter 2. Students are aided in finding mentors and a peer support group and are integrated within the MAC setting through the actions of fellow institutional members (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Schmitt & Duggan, 2011; Blake, 2007). The descriptions of types of relationships which are common on the Mortimer Adler College campus are presented in this section to provide a deeper understanding of the strength of the College community.

Students as Peers and Mentors

The campus community at MAC is extremely strong. Faculty, staff, and students regularly interact and feel very comfortable interacting with each other. Everyone on campus is referred to as Mr. or Ms. accompanied by their last name, which creates a sense that all members are equal. Students are naturally able to relate to other students as they have completed or will complete all of the same coursework in the same time frame. There is a feeling that students are able to relate to each other due to the curriculum, which is the most prevalent force in their lives. The small size of the student body, about 380 students at the time of data collection, is also a factor in explaining the strength of the campus community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students are enrolled in small classes, 18 being the largest size of any class, and since these classes are all discussion based each individual has a chance to get to know the rest of the students in the class. The small size of the student body also allows for students to interact regardless of grade level. There is, because of the small size of the student body a natural support system because all students share common experiences and most students know each other by sight even if they are in different grade levels and/or have never taken a course together.

… you know it's a small school um but then again it really gives you a chance, not only to like make deep friendships which you can obviously do anywhere but one thing that I

kind of like here is that people do find out if you do incredibly stupid shit, which I think

has its advantages. But on the other hand I feel like it's an "everybody looking out for

each other" mentality in many ways. (Student).

This student participant highlighted the benefit to small size in providing a strong sense of

community. Students form a peer group which is supportive of the entire student population.

Study groups and activities are open to all students and student participants indicated that they

enjoy interacting with freshmen because it reminds them of their own freshman year and of the

texts studied at that time.

One negative aspect of the small student body with regards to community is that even if a

large percentage of the student body as a whole attends an event it seems like not many students

attended. This creates a sense of a lack of willingness to participate among students. One

student complained of lack of attendance at a school sponsored event:

One of the other things that happens is, trying to make parties better. For some reason

there has been a failing of people wanting to go to the school sponsored parties. There

were like fifty people at Faust party, and that's strange for a school that is so small, that

should really like to get out all the stress of academic life.

Her view of this event is sharply contrasted by an administrator participant who tried to

put the numbers into perspective saying that around 150 attended the Faust party, which is nearly

half of the student body. This administrator spoke about the ability of a single class group to set

the mood for the community as a whole:

You know my own view on that is those things kind of ride a wave, again partly because

we're so small, you'll notice there are times when there will just be a great class that will

set a certain tone for the campus and they'll kind of carry the curve in a direction as they

move through freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, then they graduate and you realize

wow this year's senior class doesn't have quite the same spirit to it and I think when it

comes to these sorts of community character and community issues we just ride a wave.

And we're so small that it's hard to generalize. I think at times it feels like the problem is

things are a little too fractured other times it feels like it's a little too claustrophobic. And

I think students themselves go through this kind of oscillation being this very small and

intense community.

His sentiments point out the closeness but also identify another issue which causes some

problems with the sense of community; because there are so few students, everyone knows

everyone else and students begin to feel "claustrophobic". Further, most students who live on

campus do not have cars and must rely upon public transportation to leave campus, this issue of

remote location causes problems within the community as students said they felt as if they had

very little alone time.

The small size of the community can cause what would seemingly be a small issue at a

larger school to become a very big problem for students. While the assumption is that all

students will live on campus there is simply not enough space currently to house them all and

some students prefer to live off campus and are allowed to if they have notified the

administration. This has caused a trend for upperclassmen to not reside on campus, leaving the

on-campus students to feel that the community is fractured as they do not have time to interact

with their peers outside of class time.

There are a lot of people who live off of campus right now, like a lot of people. I don't

even see the seniors most of the time. I know all of them but I don't see them outside of

class times at all. So the administration has said "let's bring them on campus, we're

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building these new dorms let's just bring our on campus residency up to like 80%." So that's one of the things that's happening, trying to bring people, really force them back together like you are in seminar (Student).

The lack of senior class presence on campus has created a problem with a traditional event held yearly on campus called Reality. This was the most mentioned topic among students when they were speaking about community. Reality is a party which is traditionally hosted by the Sophomore Class in honor of the graduating seniors at the end of the school year. All classes are invited but the purpose of the event is "supposed to be like helping them get back into reality after 4 years of whatever this is" (Student). Because of the lack of senior presence on campus the Sophomore Class has decided to redesign the Reality party, making it an event full of activities that the sophomores would like and removing the focus from the seniors. This is not due to the lack of concern for the graduating senior class, but due to a lack of knowledge of what the seniors would want for this event. Further, the new design would require that the seniors pay for their tickets, which has not been done in the past, and has angered the Senior Class. This conflict has divided the student community, some siding with the seniors and favoring tradition, others desiring a more fun filled event for all students. This issue is clearly exacerbated by the greater than usual percentage of students living off campus paired with the small size of the student body.

But I guess it's more of a problem here than at other places because of the interconnectedness of things. The parties are interconnected and the sophomores do it for the seniors so if there's a disconnect there then it's a problem, whereas at other colleges maybe it doesn't come out as much. But I don't know what could be done to fix that, I mean I guess there could be more activities connecting the two (Student).

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The sentiment expressed by this student and by many other participants, that there is a sense of fracture in the community could be an explanation for the decline in retention Mortimer Adler College has experienced. Students voiced concern that this fracturing is problematic for their ability to view peers as a support group since many of their peers are not on campus outside of class time. Further, the presence of more students on campus could help to alleviate some of the stress students reported feeling through the increased availability of advanced students who have shared experienced with newer students.

Faculty as a Source of Student Support

The two groups which have the most interaction at MAC are students and faculty. There is a sense of mutual respect for each other, students respect their tutors who are viewed as guides to learning, and tutors respect students for self-selecting into the College and engage in a high level of academic intensity to persist. There is a culture of tutor availability to students which is prevalent on campus and throughout observations students were seen approaching tutors. What is most noteworthy about the interactions observed between students and tutors on campus outside of class time is that tutors always stopped for students and remained engaged until the student walked away. Students voiced a clear sense of connection with their tutors and place a high value on this connection. Tutors recognize the importance of their availability to students though there is no standard for how this availability is expressed. The tutors who have been employed longer seem to prefer a method which requires that students initiate the interactions such as one tutor participant who said:

> I leave my door open all the time. That's it, that's largely what I do. My door is open, I mean I don't have a key, I have one, its back home, but I never carry it. Which means that students know and on occasion, on a number of occasions they feel okay with

walking in and saying "can you help me with X?" and so we go to the blackboard. I

guess I have kind of a reputation of a guy who they'll go to if they have Einstein problem

or a junior math problem, "can you help me with this". When the door's open which is

pretty much always, that's it.

That is not to say that this tutor and other more seasoned tutors do not encourage

interaction with students, the tutor spent a fair amount of time describing his office setting as a

source of encouragement as he has created a comfortable seating area and keeps a large bowl of

candy on a table in clear view from the doorway. While this seems somewhat trivial, the

presence of the candy bowl which is available to anyone passing by the office is, to this tutor, a

source of encouragement to interact. This method stands in contrast to the method employed by

another tutor participant, who is a newly employed tutor and prefers to reach out to students who

she deems in need of assistance:

> … yesterday I had a student just come over for coffee. I was even thinking "should I just
>
> check on her?" Cause I knew at the end of last semester she was having kind of a hard
>
> time but then I thought "no cause then it's just going to be like coming over for coffee
>
> with Mrs. X and she's just doing sort of an academic check up on me" and so I didn't
>
> ask. I just kind of let the conversation go, talking about music and other things and then I
>
> was glad that she actually on her own talked about what's making her feel better this
>
> semester compared with last, but I kind of actively decided to make it more just social
>
> than academic.

These two tutors voiced sentiments which were supported by campus observations. The tutors

who are older and have been employed at the institution for a longer amount of time typically

waited for students to initiate interaction. Younger tutors who have been employed for a shorter

amount of time were often seen approaching groups of students on campus and in the coffee

shop and dining hall. During observation sessions I was able to discern the identity of various

tutors by referencing the faculty pages of the Mortimer Adler College website.

While the types of interaction differ, all tutors interviewed as well as two of the

administrators, who are both also tutors, reported that they initiate contact with students if the

student is having trouble academically. According to a tutor, when speaking about the ratio of

academic interactions to social interactions, "I would say it's probably more academic, probably

like 70/30". When a student is underperforming or is not completing work in a satisfactory

manner the tutors will meet with the student to determine methods for academic improvement.

From the perspective of the students, many felt that while tutors are available to assist

them whenever they need academic assistance the tutors are not as involved in the social lives of

students. Students did indicate that they were not sure if it would be appropriate for tutors to

attend all activities, noting that some tutors do attend parties as chaperones but the students

would not necessarily want tutors to participate in the parties. With this in mind, students felt

that tutors could be more active in non-academic activities on campus. One student expressed

what he felt was an area in need of improvement with regards to faculty and student

relationships:

> There are a few tutors who are pretty involved in intramurals which is great, you know
>
> you're talking with a tutor for two hours in class and then you go and play soccer with
>
> them, and it's a completely different environment, which is something that I really like.
>
> When it comes to study groups I don't think I've ever heard of anyone who wanted to
>
> start a study group and couldn't find a tutor who was interested. So that's really good,
>
> although personally, one thing, and this is something I'm trying to set up I'd like to see

tutors taking more initiative to invite students to things themselves. And not in like a "I'm having an invitation only study group" or whatever, but it would be really cool I guess if tutors hosted some sort of events and um I guess if they are interested in knowing a greater part of the student body better, taking a step to do that. Because I think there, as easy as it is, there are definitely a lot of students here who don't have much or many outside of classroom relationships with tutors. Which to me seems sad and also silly because that's a huge part of the reason why I'm here. So yeah I think there's definitely room for more tutor-community involvement.

One administrator explained what he feels is the reason faculty are often not involved with student activities outside of the academic realm:

We have a younger faculty which means more people with families. There's this thing that used to be perennial that's gotten much less common called NABLA, have you heard about this? So NABLA is a party that's thrown by the seniors maybe, basically of age students on a Friday afternoon would get together with tutors I used to go religiously and then I had a family and it's just like Friday at 5 o'clock you know my wife would kill me if I said "I'm going to hang out with the students and have a drink with them", she'd be like "no you're not". So that's I think that's a demographic, and my guess as all of us start becoming old geezers we'll probably go there more often, when our kids are actually in college themselves my guess is that we will start doing that more. Plenty of us enjoy it, it's a lot of fun and again we know all these people so it's not like we'd be going and feeling awkward.

There is a focus on the tutors as mentors for the students and because students view their tutors as being highly approachable there is a level of comfort among the two groups this

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situation is in line with the assertions of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) who attribute increased retention rates for institutions where there is a culture of student and faculty interaction. Even though social interaction among students and tutors is limited the large amount of outside of class interaction in general is clearly beneficial for students. All groups mentioned that if a student is considering departure from MAC the student must meet with tutors and discuss their decision prior to withdrawing from the institution. This is a method employed by the College to ensure that students are leaving for the right reasons and not due to a stressful week or onetime event. While this method is incredibly supportive of retention and further displays the level of concern felt by the faculty for the students this may not be rational for a larger higher education setting. It would be more difficult for an institution with a larger population to identify and counsel every student who was considering departure. However, due to the small size of the student body and unique curriculum at Mortimer Adler College, students should have the ability to meet with faculty and discuss problems or other opportunities with faculty. The high level of student and tutor interaction is supportive of retention and likely contributes to the high rate of retention at MAC.

Faculty Relationships

The strong relationships among faculty can also contribute indirectly to the high rate of retention at MAC. The faculty form a strongly bonded group who regularly participate in study groups with one another and who rely upon each other for assistance and furthering their own knowledge. Further, as faculty team-teach some of the courses students are able to view faculty interactions, which are often not purely the case of both faculty members agreeing on a single point. During the seminar class observation I witnessed the two faculty members disagree on a

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point, each providing their own supporting argument. This was in no way contemptuous, but allowed students an opportunity to discuss the opposing opinions.

I feel as if I've got really good relations with a lot of my colleagues. I don't feel like I have bad relations with any of my colleagues you know there are some that I wouldn't sit down and have a beer with just because we don't have interests that are strongly aligned but I have no hostility toward anyone. And I suspect that on the basis of stories I've heard elsewhere that's a fairly unusual situation. But I think it has to do with the fact that we have the unified program that we're all involved in and we have one project and we're all working together on it. Some of us have different ideas on how best to achieve it but nobody's not trying to do it the best they can, so I've been happy for 22 years and that's more than a lot of people can say, so I feel like I'm pretty damn lucky (Tutor).

The types of relationships experienced by the faculty clearly set the tone for the type of community experience felt on campus. Faculty regularly engaged in conversations about topics both directly related to the Curriculum and topics which were academic but not Curriculum related. During observations in the campus coffee shop faculty regularly engaged each other in conversations and there were many small study groups of multiple faculty members discussing literature. Students are able to view their faculty mentors as collaborators in education and thus the student mirror these actions and share the sense of commitment to collaboration.

Staff as Individuals vs. The Administration.

Schmitt and Duggan (2011) spoke to the importance of institutional staff members as a source for the dissemination of information as well as a key component in aiding students in problem solving techniques. Study participants are very comfortable approaching staff and generally like the staff though they do not have as much contact with staff members. Staff

members as a group are viewed as The Administration and are spoken of with some contempt when considering the imposing of rules. Students typically only interact with staff members for problem solving but all participants responded that they have very good relationships with various staff members and that staff members are always willing to offer assistance. In the office of the assistant dean an international student came in the office and was immediately greeted by name by the staff member at the front desk. The student told the staff member that he was having trouble with completing a writing assignment that was due the next day. The staff member asked to see the student's schedule, then called a writing assistant and set up an appointment for the student to meet with the writing assistant to complete the assignment. This interaction was not forced and seemed very natural for both the student and the staff member. There is a sense among the staff that their primary role is to provide support for students, a sentiment which is recognized by students who feel comfortable reaching out to the staff for assistance.

As individuals the staff members on campus are well liked and often participate in campus activities. As a group, the staff are seen as "The Administration" and are not well liked. MAC students seem to have a sense of ownership of the campus and view the administration as a force which imposes rules and makes decisions without student input. Currently, the administration is working to change campus residency policies and has, according to participants, been more active in attempting to rectify disagreements among the student body. One student explained how staff members are well liked but tension exists between students and the administration as a group:

> I know the administration is made out to be a pretty evil force on campus right now and
> because of recent events and that's not necessary because everyone in the administration

is super nice and just like trying to help you as much as they can. They'll go above and

beyond like what their actual job pertains to with helping you as a student. They're all

awesome and want to help and want to know students and know what's going on and

they are particularly concerned if there's some sort of break in the community. They as

administration really can't do anything to fix it but you know you can tell that they would

want to if they could so I think they do their best to get to know students I don't know

why it's become such a students vs. administration thing.

This sentiment displays the positive impact of an actively involved staff on student retention but

also explains some of the concerns voiced by students. Many of the students discussed people

they know who have departed the institution because of a feeling of lack of support by the

administration. There is a feeling that administrators are only present to enforce rules and that

the rules are often counterproductive to student initiatives. This provides a clear rationale for the

shift of administrative culture at institutions of higher education in that staff members should

work to be supportive and involved in student life so that they are not viewed as rule enforcers

alone.

The Community Combined

After examining the various segments of the Mortimer Adler College community it is

clear that the culture which is supported by the College is strong and provides a built in support

group for students. This section will provide a discussion of how the groups work together to

form the campus community as a whole. Observations showed that all members regularly

interact, though participants often spoke of the groups they interacted with the most, not the

community as a whole, marking the importance of providing a view of how the groups function

together. The campus community as a whole is very strong. Individuals typically recognize

each other as a community member by sight and many faculty and staff members know the names of most students. The small size of the institution makes this level of personalization in interactions realistic, though this would probably not be feasible at a larger campus. The problems currently faced with the community such as higher than average off campus residents, perceived lack of faculty participation in activities, and tension among students and staff are issues which could be remedied. These issues are exacerbated by the small size of the campus community and would likely not be seen as concerns at a larger institution. It is of note that if the types of interactions currently in place at Mortimer Adler College are not common occurrences at other institutions and are promoted as best practices by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Schmitt and Duggan (2011). MAC has already created a plan which will be implemented next year to bring more students back to campus. More dorms will be completed and there will be a greater expectation for students to live on campus. MAC administration has realized that forcing all students to live on campus is not realistic and have taken an approach which allows those who need to live off campus to do so but encourages those who could otherwise reside on campus to move back to the dorms. The lack of faculty participation in activities could be a reflection of student perception rather than a statement regarding the reality of the situation. All faculty participants indicated that they regularly attended study groups and club meetings but did not have an interest in attending student parties. When asked if students wanted faculty at parties the students who voiced this concern said they would not necessarily want faculty to attend. Here it is possible that the student perception is skewed because the students see each other so often because they are primarily on campus residents, but faculty who most often live off campus are not around quite as much. Further, the faculty seemed unaware in most cases that students wanted them around more. The students may be more satisfied with

faculty involvement if they voice their concerns to the faculty as the faculty seem very willing to be involved. The student and administration tension is an issue which would take longer to alleviate.

The only issue which was mentioned by all campus members which is not easily rectified is the lack of female presence on campus. MAC members all agreed that there are far more males than females among students, faculty, and staff, but that this phenomenon is limited to the Southwest campus. This is troublesome for female students who are seeking same sex mentors and peers. This is not an issue which is easily remedied, as there is no clearly articulated method to encourage more female students to apply. One student spoke about his feelings about the disparity of the amount of male to female tutors:

> I think there are some other things that I'm not sure how accidental versus essential or intentioned they are but you know the staff could use more female members, definitely. Is it a problem to me, not really, I love all the female tutors I've had. Most of the male tutors I've liked too, you know I think the only reason why there are male tutors I don't like is because I've had so many more of them. So you know that's one of those things that like you notice and gets talked about, I'm not convinced that that actually has a negative impact on the college. But it does seem a little strange at times.

There has been some effort to identify suitable female tutors and staff members as positions become available, but these changes will occur slowly over time. Recently a recurring event has been implemented, Ladies Lunch, which allows female students, faculty, and staff to come together for lunch so that a stronger support group for females can be formed. This notion of the availability of adult mentors and of peers who are similar in gender can, according to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), work to improve retention.

Student Life

"[For] first year students a lot of the work of having them acclimate themselves to MAC happens in the classroom. I mean a very large part of what it means to learn to be at MAC is to learn how one positions oneself in a conversation in a classroom" (Tutor).

There are no traditional first year experience programs. However, retention is supported through institutional characteristics which are not organized into a formal first year experience program. At Mortimer Adler College, socialization into the environment, which occurs through the immersion into the academic setting is more supportive of retention than a specific activity. The student orientation consists of three days of short meetings during which campus rules are presented, students are given a tour, they are made aware of healthcare and academic resources, and are told about current extracurricular activities and how to form new extracurricular activities. Students are assigned "core groups" at the beginning of their freshman year and participate in all classes with their core group peers. In a sense, there is no need for MAC to have a more traditionally structured first year experience program as there are typically only 100 freshmen, other students will recognize them as new students, and they are immersed in academics with their peers. This is in line with Blake (2007) as students are assigned a core group which forms their institutional support group. In these core groups students will learn to function in the academic setting with peers who are going through the same experience.

Cohorts as a natural peer group

Mortimer Adler College employs the cohort method as a key element of their Great Books Curriculum. In this method no student is allowed to enter the college without following the prescribed curricular structure. Students may transfer between campuses, but no student may transfer into the college without beginning as a freshman. Transferring between campuses is a

somewhat regular occurrence as students often want to experience the same curriculum in a different regional setting, but these transfers have participated in the Curriculum in the same manner on either campus so the transition is somewhat seamless. The method suggested by Banning (1989) mirrors the method employed by MAC. In the MAC setting there are no students who are outside of the cohort. This is made easier by the lack of academic departments and multiple majors. It is only natural that students function as a cohort in a system where all students follow the same academic path. The cohort forms the natural support group and cohorts at various levels can work to support new students as all advanced students will have had similar experiences as students at the beginning of the Curriculum. The smaller core groups of students formed when students enter the College remain as a stable group of students who will take all courses together throughout their time at Mortimer Adler College. The various core groups will interact in classes at different times throughout the four years of study.

Summary

The methods employed by MAC which create day to day operations are inherently supportive of high retention. The Great Books Curriculum is a highly prescribed and structured curriculum. The Curriculum is articulated in a way which allows students to clearly discern the path to degree attainment. The use of cohorts, which is natural for the structure of the curriculum, creates a student support group so that any student on campus has common experiences both academic and socially with other students on campus. The high level of support and interaction felt between students and faculty creates an atmosphere of support as well. Students are able to approach faculty at any time and faculty are committed to aiding students during their time at the College.

The location of the MAC southwest campus causes some students to feel isolated and makes forming relationships with the community outside of the campus difficult. This is not something that can be fixed. As the campus location cannot be physically moved and even if greater ties to the outside community are formed students will still have difficulty accessing these resources. At the time of data collection a student shuttle was being implemented to aid students in gaining access to resources off campus, but this will not remove the sense of isolation felt on campus. The linear layout of the campus makes finding common areas difficult for students, but again this is not an issue which could be fixed as the campus would have to be completely redesigned and the geography of the area would likely not allow for a circular campus layout.

The small size of the student body is both positive and negative. The positive aspect of size is that students are able to form a network of peers, faculty, and staff who are readily available for support. However, the small size creates limits in the sense that many students share common background characteristics and interests. It is difficult for individuals to stand out amongst such a small group of people who have all self selected into the same unique setting. This causes some students to feel lost in the group and participants voiced concern that they had to find more time to initiate activities in order to feel that they were making a lasting impact at the College.

Many participants voiced the desire to raise the retention rate at Mortimer Adler College. Possibly the greatest hindrance to raising the retention rate at MAC is the Great Books Curriculum. It is so specific in nature and offer so little variation that students either experience complete buy in or leave. My discussion with administrators regarding this issue left them unable to determine if they would actually want the retention rate to be higher. In theory a

higher retention rate would be seen as a positive change regarding finances, but a higher

retention rate would mean changing key characteristics of the college, such as revisions to the

curriculum or increasing the size of the student population. The admissions process would need

to be altered so that only students who were a perfect fit would be accepted, which is seen as

contrary to the mission of the College. There would need to be more flexibility in the curriculum

and less academic intensity in coursework, both of which are viewed as unacceptable. There is

some discussion regarding the lowering of tuition costs, which could help the students who

depart for financial reasons, but this is a theory which is regarded on campus as an unlikely

possibility. The most interesting view about retention statistics is that it is widely accepted for

students to enroll for a year, leave for some time, then return later to complete the Mortimer

Adler College curriculum, picking up where they left off. These students are statistically a loss,

though the College sees these students as success stories. This disparity is something that is

embraced because the stop-out then return students are said to be the better students and often

troubled students are encouraged to follow this method.   This brings to the forefront the issue of

how retention is calculated nationally and if the first-time, full-time, method is rational given that

students who are between the ages of 18-19 and are beginning college right out of high school

may not be prepared to undertake the demands of higher education without stopping and later

returning.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will answer the research questions posed beginning with addressing *institutional efforts*, *student needs*, and finally the areas of overlap which are termed *successful matriculation*. The answers to the research questions are formulated from the findings derived from the data collected at Mortimer Adler College.

Institutional Efforts

The Great Books Curriculum

The role of the institution in supporting high retention can be viewed in various ways when considering Mortimer Adler College. The primary method of creating a stable retention environment is not a retention program but is the primary identifying characteristic of the institution, the curriculum. The nature of the curriculum supports students and causes them to want to continue their enrollment. The Great Books Curriculum is very clearly articulated in all documents and is well known by all students and potential students. This curriculum is unchanging and has very clear milestones for completion. Due to the well articulated path, students share a sense of desire to reach the end of the Curriculum, and want to remain enrolled to see it through. While the curriculum does not focus on real world skills, nor form a solid connection with the lives of the students, it is a shared interest among all students. There is a high level of academic intensity associated with the curriculum which, when paired with the lack of clearly identifiable real world connections, should hinder retention but due to the campus environment works towards supporting high retention.

Brinkworth, et al. (2009) and Meyer, et al. (2009) found that too much intensity in academics caused students to depart the institution as they had trouble seeing themselves as successful within the environment. MAC makes little attempts to prepare students prior to the start of coursework preferring to rely upon a method in which they learn by participating in the

process. The level of intensity is clearly a rationale for student departure; however this is not viewed as a negative occurrence by the institution, where students often depart and return after some period of time away. Instead of hindering student persistence, the intensity of the program provides students with a sense that overcoming the difficulty is a great achievement which they want to realize for themselves. Further, the rationale for the calculation of retention rates may not be valid for the current population of students within the United States higher education system.

Support for a Variety of Activities

MAC supports a wide array of activities on campus. These activities are primarily student formed and run but receive a high level of support from the College through the availability of resources for student initiatives. Students know that they are able to form a group for almost any activity they would like and there is a large budget available to support these activities. MAC sponsors several events on campus such as parties, concerts, and lectures as well. In some sense the College serves as social coordinator for the students. MAC as a whole is extremely supportive of the activities on campus but often has little control over the coordination of the most prevalent of the activities, namely study groups and clubs. Most of the activities on campus have an academic dimension, even parties which often have academic themes. The infusion of academics into social activities is something which seems very natural for institutional members at all levels. They feel little need to separate their academic and social lives which could be detrimental since there is, as previously mentioned, a high level of intensity associated with the curriculum and students have almost no method of taking a break from academic themed endeavors.

The wide range of activities is a positive force for retention as students are able to create any activity they would like. There is a lack of more highly organized activity types such as sports teams and Greek organizations which are seen to improve retention in more traditional settings and aid students in identifying peers with whom they share common interests (Burks & Barrett, 2009). The absence of these types of activities is well known to potential students as it is specifically noted in marketing materials and on the College website. However, in this setting the lack of athletic programs and Greek organizations may work to aid retention as the sports clubs, social clubs, and study groups which are prevalent are far less stringent in their rules and requirements. Students may attend these events as they wish but there is little obligation to attend every meeting. The absence of traditional organizations sets a context where there are less outside forces distracting students from academic endeavors. This may impact retention in the sense that students feel a personal connection to the Curriculum as there is little separation between class time and social time. This lack of separation of time builds student interest in academic subject matter and supports a culture of wanting to reach the end of the Curriculum.

Support for Academic and Personal Well-being

There is a high level of support for students at MAC ranging from academic and health resources to the more abstract such as faculty and staff who are aware of students who seem to be struggling and a culture of mentoring. Counseling and medical services are available for students who may make use of these services at any time. There are academic aids for all courses and students are encouraged to seek help throughout their time at the College. Faculty are crucial to the support structure at MAC, and serve as mentors and helpers for students. Faculty regularly interact with students due to both student initiated interactions as well as faculty initiated interactions. Students who approach faculty are always given the time they

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request. This practice creates an atmosphere of comfort amongst the students and the faculty and

students rely upon the faculty members to help them through the Great Books Curriculum.

Faculty are mindful of the academic intensity of the Curriculum and are keen to notice when a

student is absent from class or is having difficulty. When these situations occur faculty members

will meet with the student to discuss problem solving options and will work with the student to

alleviate stress. The support which is given to students by the faculty is also available from the

administration. Administrators never send a student to another office to solve a problem; instead

the staff/administrator will attempt to solve the problem for the student. Students are also

encouraged to interact with staff members and with administrators and most of these institutional

members know students by name and will step in to aid a student when necessary. Campus

administrators are also very careful to listen to the needs of students and to make attempts to

address these needs when possible, such as the implementation of a student shuttle to take

students into town.

The level of support and interaction seen at MAC among students and faculty and

students and staff is in line with what is called for by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). Students

and faculty interact regularly and in various contexts. Students are able to feel that they know

their tutors personally and that the tutors are interested in the student's progress.   Even though

the majority of interactions are academic in nature the state of intertwined social and academic

life on campus means that, to some extent, meeting with a tutor about academics is equivalent to

a social meeting. Though students have less strong relationships with staff and administrators on

campus these individuals are still seen as approachable and helpful by students. As many of the

staff and administrators participate in study groups and various other activities and many are

alumni of the College, students feel a connection with these individuals and feel that they can rely upon staff and administrators for support and problem solving.

There is a large amount of assistance with securing financial support at Mortimer Adler College. According to marketing publications most students receive a combination of grants and loans and there are programs which were mentioned by student participants to aid in covering the cost of summer coursework at other institutions or other learning experiences. None of the student participants noted any concern with regard to the high cost of attending MAC. Faculty and administrators did voice a concern about the high cost of attendance with regard to recruitment but did not attribute cost to any loss of enrolled students. It is likely that in this setting the students who self select into the College already possess the means to secure finances. Further, students who choose a non-specific Liberal Arts degree which possesses little career skill training may be those who are members of more affluent families.

Student Needs

A Curriculum That Appeals to Students

While the curriculum is overall supportive of retention the students at Mortimer Adler College voiced a desire for some revisions. Supplemental texts should be updated more regularly in order for the Curriculum to feel more current. This could help students to better relate their academic activities to their real life experiences. This might make the academic intensity seem more worthwhile to the students who consider departure due to academic stress. There is also some desire among students to have some form of contemporary information infused into the curriculum. Colleges and universities should make an effort to not only clearly define the goals of curriculum but should work to ensure that the curriculum and its related coursework makes sense to students. If students understand the process and feel a connection to

the curriculum they are more likely to want to persist. Finally, students reported a desire to have more practical assistance with their writing during coursework. It is unclear how a curriculum which is designed to rely heavily upon student writing as a form of assessment is lacking in writing instruction, but there is a clear lack of specific writing courses within the curriculum, which favors building this skill through other types of coursework. This is indicative of a student need for preparation for the future. As the student participants at Mortimer Adler College indicated that writing would be essential to their future goals of attending graduate school, it is important for colleges and universities to incorporate learning which meets the needs of students. It is important to know what students goals for the future are and to align learning with these goals so that students will feel a sense of gaining skills they need, not skills which they cannot clearly see a use for in the future.

Students Want to Share in Decision Making

The students at MAC feel a great deal of ownership of the school and want to be part of the decision making processes on campus. While they do feel that they are able to voice their needs and desires to administrators they do not feel that their needs are always recognized. The perception of lack of collaboration in decision making causes tension between the student body and the administration, which could easily be remedied if students were able to share in the process. The students feel that they are often administered to, rather than part of the process, which creates a student perception of lack of administrative support. While the administration is supportive on many levels, allowing students to have a clear role in the creation and revision of policies could give the student body the sense that they are part of the organization. Students feel that they are not included in decisions regarding food service, housing regulations, and identifying solutions to problems within the campus community. This level of inclusion should

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be available for students at all institutions of higher education as it enables students to take

ownership of the campus and of their experience and will lead to a greater feeling of

commitment to the institution. The increased commitment will improve retention in that students

will want to remain at a college or university to which they feel a connection.

Socialization as a Group

Students socialize within the environment in a collaborative manner. The cohort method

allows students to experience the setting as a group. The group as a whole must work through

difficulties together and there is a sense that all members are essential to the learning experience

creating a high level of support among peers. Students also share common experiences across

class groups and are supported by advanced students who have all participated in the same

coursework and often have had similar concerns and issues. When considering Van Maanen and

Schein (1979) the socialization at MAC is both informal, there is no structured method for

integration into the community, and random, there is no specific order for socialization methods

to occur, and must occur during a fixed time frame. This would be detrimental to the retention at

traditional colleges and universities as students are offered little assistance in adapting to the

academic structure other than to simply participate and figure it out. The social academic culture

which is present allows for the less structured socialization methods and allows for the lack of a

true first year experience program which would be necessary if the culture of the institution was

not as strong as it currently is. There is no set pattern or order for adapting to the culture at MAC

but if a student fails to adapt by the end of the first semester they are counseled by tutors and in

some cases asked to leave the institution. A greater level of structure in aiding students to

assimilate to what may be an entirely new and extremely demanding method of learning could

help students to socialize more quickly and could help them to feel more successful in their coursework.

Another component of MAC socialization is the demand for divestiture from students (Van Maanen & Schein, 1976). All students are encouraged to leave their past learning and experiences behind and to approach the curriculum as something completely new. While this does allow for the sense that all students are equal it removes some of the individuality of students and takes away from their ability to show their strengths in some areas. However, it is incredibly successful in supporting retention as each individual student is equalized and paired with the lack of grades there is little competition voiced among participants. Further, as all students accept the Mortimer Adler College method as new and as a way of life all share common experiences, further strengthening the sense of campus community.

Successful Matriculation

Retention

- Curriculum
- Constant Faculty Interaction
- Supportive Administration
- High Level of Support for Student Initiatives

Successful Matriculation

Persistence

- Cohorts
- Shared Interests and Experiences Among Students
- Freedom to Create Activities
- Small Community
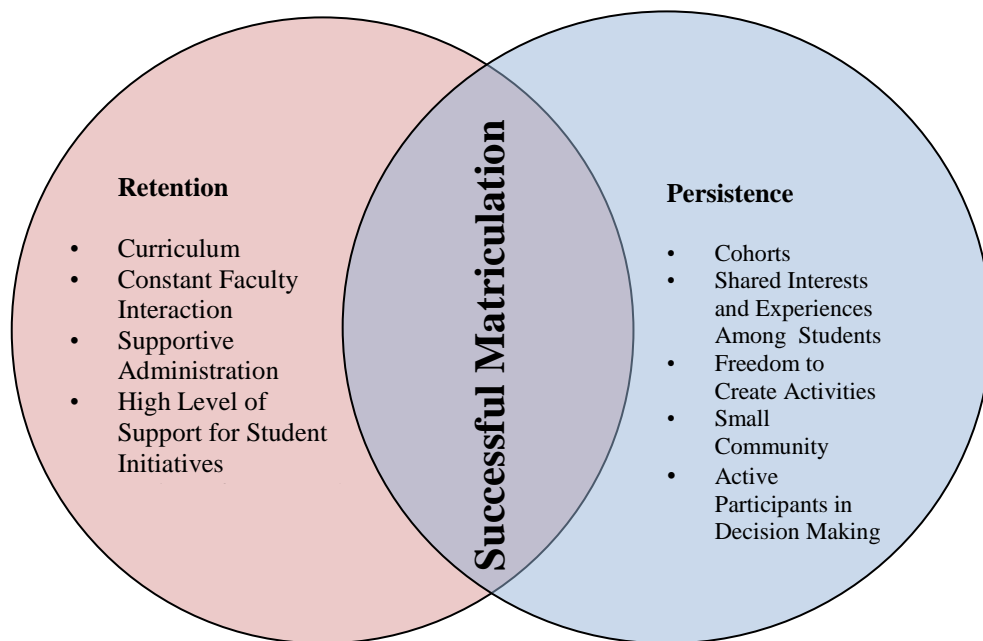- Active Participants in Decision Making

Figure 4. Retention, Persistence, and Successful Matriculation based upon findings

Figure 5. Components of successful matriculation

There are many areas of overlap which can be deemed successful matriculation at

Mortimer Adler College. The curriculum and its method of dissemination are an important

characteristic for the students who choose to persist and are a strong part of the identity of the

institution. The curriculum demands that the student body remain small in size and function as

cohorts. This allows students to form a natural support group among peers and allows for a high

level of interaction among students and faculty as the student to faculty ratio is consistently low.

Staff and administrators attempt to maintain a strong relationship with students and do make

attempts to meet the needs of the students as they arise. The institution as a whole is very

supportive of student activities and initiatives and thus a variety of activities are available. The

component, shared experiences, is not a component of successful matriculation because, while

the shared experience was important to some student participants, the institution does little to

encourage interaction of members due to shared experience. When asked specifically about the

creation of mentoring programs to promote interaction through shared experience most

participants responded that they would not be interested in this nor do they think they would gain anything from the experience. Student participation in decision making is also not a component of successful matriculation as there is, at this time, no support for any benefit to retention. Because Mortimer Adler College does not currently involve students in decision making efforts and because students responded that they would like to be involved but did not know exactly how they would like their involvement to look, there is no support for its inclusion in successful matriculation. Further research in this area would be needed to discern whether student involvement in decision making has a bearing on retention.

Suggestions for Improvement

Mortimer Adler College is successful with regards to retention despite institutional characteristics which should hinder the achievement of a high rate of retention. The College is, however not without need for improvement. Suggestions for improvement will be presented to the institutional administration so that the College may work to better serve the student body. With this in mind there are some areas which could use revision to create a more satisfied student body. There is little true down time for MAC students. All student participants indicated they were under some amount of stress and indicated that at times the stress was extreme. Another issue which should be addressed is the student perception that they are not part of campus policy and decision making. Tutors and staff should work to be more present outside of regular class time and office hours. Although tutors seemed very present during the day, there is a need by the students to interact with tutors and staff outside of structured time. Students would benefit from more frequent interaction with adults during activities as they could form stronger connections with these campus members. The feeling of isolation among the student body is closely related to the geographic location of the campus. While the campus cannot be physically

moved, creating connections with organizations off campus could help students to feel less isolated. The College should work to partner with schools in the area, especially K-12 schools, where students could serve as mentors to younger students and volunteers. This would help to alleviate the sense of isolation and also allow students to gain some sense of practical use for the skills learned at MAC.

Implications

It is difficult to suggest that all of the practices as a set combination would be suitable for a traditional institution of higher education. Some characteristics and qualities which clearly positively impact retention at MAC would require a tremendous shift in culture to implement in a traditional setting. The curriculum employed by MAC is clearly both a draw and a rationale for persistence among MAC students but would likely not be successful on a larger scale. MAC has no sense of need to prepare students for a specific career or applied skill set. This lack of providing preparedness would not be readily accepted in the current times where students are encouraged to study towards a specific career. The small size of the College is also something that would clearly not work at all institutions as there would be a lack of resources and a lack of space for the large number of students across the country who want access to higher education.

Yet another issue is the all full-time, majority resident student body characteristics. These qualities are very supportive of high retention but would be unsuccessful in a larger urban setting where students often work full-time and attend classes part-time. Further, not all students have the resources to live on campus as the cost is traditionally higher than living with family or sharing an apartment with friends. The lack of athletic programs removes the availability of athletic based scholarships, which would limit access to higher education to a large number of students with financial hardships (Herzog, 2005).

The areas which are beneficial to institutions of different types are communication and community. Although the type of curriculum is not realistic for all institutions the clearly articulated goals and milestones is something that could help students to want to persist. The curriculum is communicated openly and is made very clear for students, this is something that is unique and creates a sense that degree attainment is a structured process. This would be a benefit for any student. While most colleges and universities offer number of hours and some course specifics to students there is often a disconnect between the individual and the process. If institutions of higher education made a greater attempt to counsel students academically to ensure that the method for degree attainment was clearly understood by every student it is likely that fewer students would become frustrated with the process.

The sense of community on the MAC campus is one of the most successful retention practices in place. There is no sense that the strength of the campus community is forced by any of the groups, students, faculty, or staff. Students want to share their experiences with fellow students and are encouraged to interact regardless of age or class level. Faculty want to interact with their students outside of class time and want to interact with other faculty and staff. Staff members make an effort to participate in activities which will bring them closer to both faculty and students. At MAC all members work together and are supportive of each other. This would be more difficult at a larger institution where faculty would be expected to perform research and staff members were overburdened in dealing with thousands of students. However, some attempt should be made at every campus to create a sense of community and to sponsor activities which are attended by members at all levels. This would help students to feel more comfortable approaching faculty and staff to assist with problem solving and would improve retention.

The findings of this study can work to aid colleges and universities across the country. The study also has the potential to aid in student goal setting and decision making as it may help institutions to add and strengthen programs which address student needs. Further, the study may aid institutions in helping current students identify resources such as activities and services available on campus which can ease their transition into higher education as well as help them to overcome difficulties experienced during their enrollment.

The study also has the potential to inform future research in the areas of retention and persistence by highlighting areas in need of further examination. This study works to fill the gap in the literature addressing the consideration of how retention efforts and persistence function as a co-dependent system. While this study is not meant to result in widespread change, it can function to provide the basis for quantitative enquiry which might ultimately be generalized to a large population of colleges and universities as well as their students.

The findings of this study have clear implications for Mortimer Adler College in that they shed light on areas in need of improvement. It is unclear as to whether any or all of the suggestions would be accepted by the College as any small change to the curriculum or any change which could be seen to effect the curriculum would not be wanted. Institutional members did express a desire to retain a few more students and to attempt to attract more students and perhaps some of the suggestions made could assist in this effort.

Colleges and universities across the country should attempt to build a strong sense of campus community. Faculty should be encouraged to interact with students outside of the classroom. Staff members should be available to assist both students and faculty so that all members work towards the common goal of providing a good education for students. Further, members should interact across boundaries of discipline. The lack of divisions at Mortimer

Adler College allow for all members to share common goals. The common goal of providing quality education should exist at every institution of higher education. With this one goal in mind, all faculty, staff, and students share a common purpose. The ability for members to interact across disciplines is beneficial to all groups and should be incorporated into the culture of all institutions. Building a strong sense of community will not only provide students with peers and mentors but will also work to open lines of communication. A strong community retains students; the sense of strength of community should be a goal of all institutions of higher education.

Finally, this Case Study calls to question the methods which are currently used to calculate retention and the relevance of the extreme focus on retention figures by institutions of higher education. Although students who stopped their enrollment then continued after some period of time were not interviewed for this study the many anecdotes of students who left and returned or students who left to pursue a different academic opportunity shows that there is success in leaving the first choice institution. Some students may realize success either later in life or in a different setting and this is not necessarily a negative occurrence. There is concern that a student will leave and never continue their education, but those who leave and return or reenroll at a different institution should not reflect negatively on the primary institution.

Conclusion

The high rate of retention at Mortimer Adler College is supported by the combination of unique characteristics of the college and the students who self-select into the Great Books Curriculum. It is hard to determine whether these methods would be as successful in another setting or as independent attributes. Further research is necessary to determine whether similar occurrences are successful in different higher education institutions or with different populations

of students. There is clearly no perfect mixture of characteristics as some students will always have problems with adapting and finding success in higher education. With this in mind it is understandable that MAC does not have a retention rate of 100%; even a retention rate of 95% would likely be unreasonable for MAC as the uniqueness of the curriculum and the high level of academic intensity expected from students will always function as a deterrent to persistence for some students. The current retention rate at MAC, 78%, is very high and given that there are many factors which would not support retention, such as the high level of academic intensity, high cost, and the curriculum which does not prepare students for a specific career MAC is very successful.

The single most important finding is that a strong sense of community creates an atmosphere which is supportive of high retention. While the nature of the relationships which exist on campus is in line with the literature, the strength of the community is unique (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Schmitt & Duggan, 2011). The strong community at MAC makes students want to persist to support each other. All members of the campus community are devoted to the College and there is a strong sense of satisfaction and happiness when these members speak about the College and their experiences at the setting. Community and a sense of partnership among members provide support for students which would not be available if there was less community buy-in. In strengthening campus communities a culture of support and concern for fellow members will be incorporated into the lives of students, faculty, and staff which will improve satisfaction among all members and improve retention rates.

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Appendix A: Student Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your current class standing at the university (ie freshman, sophomore, etc)?
2. How long have you attended this university?
3. In what state did you attend high school?
4. Did you apply to any other universities? List.
5. Did your parents attend college or university?
6. Did you know anyone in town before you became a student here?
7. Did you know anyone who is/was a student at Mortimer Adler College before you became a student here?

Appendix B: Student Interview Protocol

1. Tell me how you came to be a student at Mortimer Adler College.
2. Can you take me through your first year at Mortimer Adler College?
3. Tell me about your friends on campus.
4. What types of activities do you like to participate in on campus?
5. Tell me about what you don't like or would like to change about Mortimer Adler College.
6. What do you think the College or faculty could do better to help you as a student?
7. Why did you decide to continue your enrollment at Mortimer Adler College after your first year?
8. What are your current goals as a Mortimer Adler College student?
9. What else would you want me to know about your experiences here at Mortimer Adler College?

Appendix C: Faculty/Staff/Administrator Demographic Questionnaire

1. From what university did you receive a bachelor's degree? Graduate degrees?
2. Did you know anyone at Mortimer Adler College prior to your employment?
3. What is your job title?
4. How long have you held your current position?
5. Have you held any other positions here prior to your current position? List.
6. What are your responsibilities in this position?

Appendix D: Faculty Interview Protocol

1. Tell me how you came to hold this position at Mortimer Adler College.
2. Tell me about the type of relationships you have with people on campus.
3. Could you tell me about some of the students you work with?
4. What do you do to encourage students to interact with you outside of class time?
5. What types of activities do you participate in on campus?
6. What do you think could be done to better support first year students in their transition from high school to the Mortimer Adler College setting?
7. Tell me some ways you think student retention (students who re-enroll after their first year of study) could be improved at Mortimer Adler College.
8. What else would you like to add about your experiences here at Mortimer Adler College?

Appendix E: Student Affairs Staff Interview Protocol

1. The retention rate here at Mortimer Adler College, Southwest is 78%, which is very high. Why do you think the retention rate here is so high?
2. Tell me about the type of relationships you have with people on campus.
3. Tell me about your interactions with students.
4. What do you/your office do to assist students during their time here?
5. Tell me about the programs you are directly involved with that are designed to assist students.
6. What do you do to attract students to your services?
7. Describe student attendance of activities and programs on campus.
8. What would you like to add or improve to help students during their time here?
9. What else would you like to add about your experiences here at Mortimer Adler College?

Appendix F: Administrator Interview Protocol

1. The retention rate here at Mortimer Adler College, Southwest is 78%, which is very high. Why do you think the retention rate here is so high?
2. What do you think needs to be done to further improve retention on your campus?
3. How do you think campus policy impacts retention?
4. What types of things would you like to see happen to better support students?
5. What are you currently doing to improve the student experience?
6. What else would you like to add about your experiences here at Mortimer Adler College?

Appendix G: Letter of Consent

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Brian Beabout in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling & Foundations at the University of New Orleans.

1. I am conducting a research study to examine why students return to a single institution of higher education after their first year of study. I am requesting your participation, which will involve a 30 – 60 minute audio recorded interview and a follow-up email or Skype interview.
2. This research will not result in any risks to you; all personal information collected will be kept confidential.
3. Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation is to aid colleges and universities in best determining how to retain students and how to best meet the needs of students to ensure their retention.
4. There are no alternative procedures to the interview process. As stated in item (8) below, participants may stop the interview at any time.
5. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. All personal data collected will remain confidential.
6. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and no compensation will be offered for your participation.
7. Should you have any questions regarding this research or your participation please contact Dr. Brian Beabout by phone at (504)280-7388 or by email at bbeabout@uno.edu.
8. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

Sincerely,

Victoria M. Palmisano

By signing below you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

_____   _____   _____
Signature   Printed Name   Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-6501.

Appendix H: IRB Approval Notification Letter

Principal Investigator: Brian Beabout

Co-Investigator: Victoria Palmisano

Date: January 12, 2012

"A Case Study to Examine Student Retention at a Less Selective University with a High Rate of Retention"

        02Jan12

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101category 2, due to the fact that any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project.
Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Appendix I: The Great Books Curriculum at Mortimer Adler College

Readings by Year			
Freshman	**Sophomore**	**Junior**	**Senior**
Homer, *Iliad*	Hebrew Bible	Cervantes, *Don Quixote*	Tolstoy, *War and Peace*
Homer, *Odyssey*	Livy, *The Early History of Rome*	Descartes, *Meditations*	Goethe, *Faust*
Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*	Plutarch, *Lives*	Pascal, *Pensees*	Hegel, *Phenome-nology of Spirit*
Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*	Virgil, *Aeneid*	Milton, *Paradise Lost*	Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*
Herodotus, *Histories*	Tacitus, *Annals*	Hobbes, *Leviathan*	Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*
Plato, *Meno*	Epictetus, *Discourses*	Spinoza, *Theologico- Political Treatise*	Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*
Plato, *Gorgias*	New Testament *Matthew*, *John* (Gospel), *I John* (Epistle), *Acts, Romans, I Corinthians*	Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*	Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*
Sophocles, *Antigone*	Aristotle, *On the Soul*	Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*	Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*
Plato, *Republic*	Plotinus, *Enneads*	Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*	Marx, *Capital*
Aristophanes, *Clouds*	Augustine, *Confessions*	Leibniz, selections	Marx, *German Ideology*
Plato, *Apology, Crito*	Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*	Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*	Wagner, *Tristan & Isolde*
Plato, *Phaedo*	Anselm, *Proslogium*	Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals*	Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*	Gaunilon's *Reply*	Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*	Joyce, "The Dead"
Plato, *Theaetetus*	Anselm's *Response*	Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*	Freud, *Introductory Lectures*
Plato, *Sophist*	Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*	Austen, *Emma*	Kafka, "The Metamorphosis"
Thucydides *Peloponnesian War*	Dante, *Divine Comedy*	Rousseau, *Social Contract*	Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*
Plato, *Phaedrus*	Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*	Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*	Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*
Plato, *Symposium*	Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*	Kant, *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals*	Heidegger, *Basic Writings*

The Great Books Curriculum at Mortimer Adler College, Continued

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*	Shakespeare *As You Like It*	Mozart, *Don Giovanni*	Melville, *Benito Cereno*
Nicomachean Ethics	Machiavelli, *The Prince*	Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*	Dred Scott Decision
Sophocles, *Ajax*	Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*	Hawthorne, *Scarlet Letter*	Lincoln Speeches
Aristotle, *Politics*	Montaigne, *Essays*	Declaration of Independence	Constitutional Amendments
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*	Shakespeare, *Richard II*	U.S. Constitution	W.E.B. DuBois, **Souls of Black Folk**
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*	Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*	Madison, Hamilton, Jay, *The Federalist*	Supreme Court Decisions
Plato, *Timaeus*	Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part II*	Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*	Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*
Aristotle, *Physics*	Bacon, *New Organon*		
Aristotle, *Metaphysics*	Bacon, *New Atlantis; Great Instauration*		
Euripides, *Medea*	Descartes, *Discourse on Method*		
Euripides, *Bacchae*	Shakespeare, *Othello*		
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*	Shakespeare *Macbeth*		
Aristotle, *Poetics*	Shakespeare, *King Lear*		
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*	Shakespeare, *Tempest*		

Vita

The author was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and moved to Mandeville, Louisiana in 1994. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in art history and classical studies from Tulane University in 2004. She obtained a Masters degree in arts administration from the University of New Orleans in 2006. During her time in the arts administration program she studied the viability of for-profit art galleries in the New Orleans French Quarter post Hurricane Katrina. She joined the University of New Orleans graduate program in educational leadership in Spring 2008 to pursue a PhD in educational administration, and became a departmental graduate assistant in Spring 2010.