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COMPASS Placement Assessment and Student Attrition at a Community College

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Walden University

College of Education

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Leslie Griffiths

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Walden University

2019

Abstract

COMPASS Placement Assessment and Student Attrition at a Community College

by

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MS, Walden University, 2011

BS, University of Central Arkansas, 1994

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

March 2019

Abstract

Considerable research has been conducted regarding the usefulness of placement testing in community colleges. Many studies show that using the COMPASS exam may lead to students' unsuccessful course completion. To better identify the factors that may result in reduced attrition, the relationship between attrition and placement testing was studied. Using Tinto's student retention model and employing qualitative methodology, this study explored the perceptions of students and faculty regarding whether COMPASS placement assessment predicted future student success in first year courses at a community college that reports higher rates of attrition when compared to other area community colleges. After completing interviews with the 10 students, 6 faculty, and 2 administrators, the data indicated that using the COMPASS placement scores did not contribute greatly to attrition. Rather, the findings from the data analysis revealed that work ethic, family obligations, and test stress factored greatly in first-year student attrition. As a possible solution, 3 retention programs identified at comparable institutions address the findings of this study: An Alternative Learning Program, a Summer Bridge Program, and use of peer mentoring. In other sites, use of these retention programs have resulted in a 15% reduction in first-year student attrition. Reducing first year student attrition provides implications for social change. By adopting these retention initiatives, the community college in this study may improve overall first-year student retention, increased funding for the college, and better serve the local community.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my wife, Shelly A. Griffiths. The time and effort it required to complete this study, quite often, came at the expense of time spent with her. Yet her patience and understanding persevered as I pushed forward towards completion. Shelly always inquired if I had homework to do, and most of the time believed the work on this study took priority over many other things. Additionally, her drive to overcome the many challenges in life she endured gave me the power to continue. Without her I would have never come to the completion of this study. I love you my dear. I must also mention my parents, Dr. Leslie M. S. Griffiths I, and Ramona M. Griffiths who showed me that finishing what you started has overwhelming rewards. Additionally, I would like to mention my children, Brandy, Branden, Trey, and Amber; and grandchildren Zachary, Lexi, Ashton, and Alyssa who as they went to school inspired me to complete this doctoral program to show them that finishing what one starts does have overwhelming rewards. I am proud of you all.

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I would also like to extend my gratitude to my doctoral committee whose constant advice and support continued to clear the pathway forward. Dr. Hadley, Chairperson; Dr. Dillard, Second Committee Person, and Dr. Redden, University Research Reviewer. Dr. Hadley has shared his vast knowledge and experience in higher education along with his constant encouragement to keep me going through all the challenges I have encountered through this process. I shall never forget. The three of you have been extremely helpful.

I would also like to acknowledge the students, faculty, and administration at the Community College where this study took place for their support as I utilized their site for this study. Without your sharing of you experiences this would never have found its way on paper.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

Community colleges across the country are increasingly asked to provide greater access to higher education, and at the same time, improve the overall graduation rates of their students. Using financial incentives and revised policy initiatives, federal and state governments have mandated higher education institutions to vastly improve access and increase success rates. The Obama administration proposed the American Graduation Initiative (AGI) to increase funding to community colleges in order to graduate an additional 5 million students. Although Congress did not pass AGI, the initiative to improve access to higher education remains a high priority among federal and state government agencies (Mullin, 2012; Palmadessa, 2017). One outcome of this evolving mandate is an increasing focus on how community colleges assess and diagnose the academic skill levels of students enrolling in their institutions. As these new students find themselves at their local community colleges, the first office they visit is the campus testing office to determine if they have the academic skills to be successful in college-level coursework. The vast majority of college and universities use some form of proficiency testing to place entering students into the courses which match their academic skill levels (Cullinan et al., 2018).

In order to determine proficiency levels, 92% of community colleges across the nation use some form of high-stakes assessment placement testing to determine whether new students are academically prepared to enter into college-level courses (Scott-

Clayton, 2012). Community colleges use either the ACCUPLACER (by the College Board) or, the COMPASS (published by ACT, Inc.) tests to make course placement decisions (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Once the enrolling students takes one of these assessments, the colleges use these scores to determine if students are prepared for college-level coursework or if students need remedial or developmental coursework.

Although most new students in community colleges take either the ACCUPLACER or COMPASS, there are few nationally established guidelines to assist institutions in developing successful placement policies. More specifically, there exist no nationally accepted, research-based directives regarding the cut-off scores that define academic readiness (Fields & Parsad, 2012). Without policy guidelines, colleges in most states develop their ACCUPLACER or COMPASS cut-off scores, creating a wide range of assessment outcomes that vary from state to state and institution to institution. One college may establish one cut-off scores for students to be placed into College Algebra courses while other colleges may use higher or lower cut scores to make the same advising decisions for their students.

Fields and Parsad (2012) examined the five most widely used entrance exams and found the highest variability in the cut-off scores for the COMPASS Algebra, which introduces questions as to what score(s) determines readiness. This variance in the use of COMPASS for College Algebra exemplifies the challenges community colleges struggle with in their placement decisions. The lack of clear and consistent placement policies related to using these placement tests warrants further research.

Due to the increases in enrollment, community colleges are seeing a large portion of their students placed into remedial coursework (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Cullinan et al., 2018). According to Bettinger and Long (2009), “remediation may negatively impact student outcomes such as persistence, major choice, and eventual labor market returns” (p. 737). An increasing number of researchers have also documented how the use of high-stakes placement testing contributes to students leaving the institution (Tinto, 2012; Veenstra, 2009). A growing body of research questions the reliability of a system of tests that often-put students into remediation, which may result in students eventually dropping out before completing their degrees (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Liu, 2010; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Additionally, Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010) found that students who ignored the recommended remedial placement recommendations and enrolled directly into collegial-level coursework had only slightly lesser rates of success compared to those students who enrolled in the recommended remedial courses. Community colleges across the country must contend with placement problems which may be linked to COMPASS placement decisions (see Hodara, Jaggars, & Karp, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012). High-stakes placement testing has increasingly become a major topic for further policy analysis and research to determine what score defines a student ready for college-level coursework.

A small rural community college, American Community College (ACC), in the Southcentral region, is emblematic of placement testing challenges most community colleges confront today. According to 2016 sources at ACC, of those students who were

placed in remedial level courses, based on the COMPASS exam results, during the fall 2013 semester; only one moved into a college-level class and passed the course with a “C” or above which contributes to the 48% retention rate reported by the college. This attrition rate is a great concern for the college as funding rates are directly tied to graduation rates (NCSL, 2015). Consequently, students who are placed in remedial classes are contributing to the attrition rate which may in the very near future determine funding levels. Administrators and faculty have acknowledged the existence of the attrition problem through numerous annual reports made to the state legislature which has been confirmed by 2016 sources at ACC. The lack of research-based information or broad policy guidelines in the usage of high-stakes placement testing is clearly an important challenge for higher education and most specifically, for ACC.

Definition of the Problem

The American Community College (ACC) is a small institution located in a medium-sized city with a population of 6,500, in the Southcentral region of the United States. With a growing student body of 2,300 students, the college serves as a transfer college offering new students a pathway to complete their first 2 years of college before entering a 4-year program at a local university. According to their 2016 catalogue, ACC offers a vast array of certificates of completion for technical skills needed by area businesses.

ACC is struggling with student access and attrition issues that challenge community colleges across the United States which was crossreferenced with 2016

reports made to the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE). The Obama administration had actively encouraged higher education, especially community colleges, to improve student graduation and success (NCSL, 2015). Provasnik, Gonzales, and Miller (2009) reported that more often than not, community colleges retain 55% of their first-year students. A recent report delivered to the Arkansas Legislature documented ACC's first-year retention rate at 48%. More than half of the students, drop out of ACC before their second year (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2017). There is a growing body of evidence suggesting a primary reason for the attrition of first-year students is linked to the students' academic preparedness and the inability of high-stakes placement tests to properly enroll students in the courses they can complete (Bailey, Jaggars, Shanna, & Jenkins, 2015; Complete College America, 2012; Tinto, 2006).

Past studies have indicated that over 50% of students entering community colleges require some remedial courses, due to less than proficient scores on college placement exams (Complete College America, 2012). This lack of college-level readiness is also evident in Arkansas public colleges as students who take reading, math, and English developmental courses graduate at a rate of 12.2% (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2017). Moreover, this coincides with a lack of progress in college-level courses. The problem which needs investigating is whether the COMPASS exam can adequately predict student success in either remedial or collegial level coursework at ACC.

Placement Exams

In most community colleges, students traditionally take assessments or skills placement exams to determine whether they are ready for college-level courses (Belfield & Crosta, 2012). If placement assessment scores do not meet institutional requirements for college-level courses, students may be placed in writing, reading, or math remedial courses to build their skills (Belfield & Crosta, 2012). The most common entrance examinations are the ACCUPLACER and the COMPASS tests, providing over 90% of community colleges a criterion for student placement (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). These tests assess reading, math, and writing levels so college placement personnel and students can make informed decisions on whether to place students in developmental or collegiate-level courses. Students who take the COMPASS tests often have not taken or have scored low on the SAT or ACT (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Many students enrolling in community colleges, such as ACC, are often first-generation or did not participate in a college track while in high school. Incoming students' lack of academic readiness is one reason community colleges ACC requires that new students take the COMPASS (Adams, 2012).

ACC has utilized the COMPASS since the mid-1990s to place students in either developmental or college-level courses. The COMPASS assesses writing, reading, and math levels to determine whether those entering college for the first time are ready for the rigors of collegial coursework (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Each year, approximately 100 students at ACC take the COMPASS assessment, and of those who take the assessment, a

majority are then placed in some developmental course while a minority are advised to register for college-level courses. ACC uses high-stakes placement testing to attempt to ensure students are registered in the correct courses. Once entering students take placement tests, their scores are measured against an established cut-off score, which varies from institution to institution. Furthermore, high school seniors in the area are not tested using the same established examination so the results from a high school assessment may show readiness where the COMPASS test may indicate a student's inability to perform academically (Conley, 2010). These state mandated tests are included on the secondary transcript which could also be used when considering placement. The problem is the high-stakes testing conducted at the college may not help ACC make effective placement decisions.

Rationale

Community colleges need to examine their course placement practices as more research emerges which questions the utility of placement tests. ACC's reliance on COMPASS without supporting research may only exemplify the problem. Using traditional trends may not produce the level of education sought by state governors. Governors such as Arkansas' Mike Beebe, called for the state to increase its percentage of community college graduates in order for the state to remain competitive in a very dynamic marketplace where all workers will need higher level skills (Smolarz, 2014). Improving the retention of students remains a long-term challenge for most higher education organizations.

Even though student attrition and success has been studied over the past 4 decades, it remains a vexing problem for most colleges. The loss incurred when students drop out of their programs of study creates a deficit in human capital, further limiting the futures of many adults (Veenstra, 2009). The student attrition problem is caused by many factors which contribute to students leaving higher education prematurely. Many researchers believe the lack of academic preparedness is one the primary reasons students drop out (Cho & Karp, 2013; Complete College America, 2012; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Solberg Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009; Tinto, 2012; Veenstra, 2009). Many researchers have studied the epistemological issues related to student attrition and have proposed a varied list of solutions (Cho & Karp, 2013; Complete College America, 2012; Solberg Nes et al., 2009). Nevertheless, student attrition remains a vexing problem. This study may help ACC examine its course placement practices, develop new approaches to improve placement recommendations for new students, and lead to higher levels of student persistence.

According to the college website, ACC, like many community colleges, has a retention problem. Only 52% of first time students enroll in their second year. Not only is ACC falling short of its primary mission to the local community, in the very near future it may lose valuable funding from the State of Arkansas. Once first-generation students drop out at ACC, few of them return to post-secondary education later, which creates an enormous loss in human capital, not to mention the financial loss to the organization (Tinto, 2012).

According to a recent ACT survey, the median national retention rate of first-year part-time and full-time students in community colleges is 56% which, when compared to ACC's 48%, supports the need for my research, to examine how effective the COMPASS assessment is placing students into first-year course. Thus, the rationale for this study is evident: The college must improve its retention rate, and a portion of the persistence problem may be possibly related to ACC's course placement practices. Evaluating the effectiveness of placement practices will assist the ACC in meeting its challenges set forth by the state's governor, Asa Hutchison. Conducting an investigation into the ability of the COMPASS test to predict success in remedial or college-level courses is the focal point of this study.

Although administrators at ACC recognize course placement remains a challenge, no one in the state of Arkansas has properly conducted a thorough evaluation of the use of COMPASS or the ACT in the past. The lack of any formal evaluation reinforces the need to conduct this study to improve course placement practices at ACC. The results of this study could also allow other institutions to benefit and improve their placement practices.

Evidence of the Problem from Professional Literature

While studies have been conducted regarding the validity of the COMPASS entrance exam, few independent examinations of the assessments have been conducted. One concerned group headed by Jay Rosner, Executive Director of the Princeton Review Foundation, attempted to examine data concerning test fairness and

found the information was closely guarded, and thus unattainable, by both the College Board and Educational Testing Service (Soares, 2012).

A recent study conducted by Judith Scott-Clayton (2012) found “the rate of over-placement and under-placement mistakes are significant in [math and English],” (p. 37). This brings into question the sole use of the COMPASS entrance exam to determine placement and success in remedial and collegial level courses. A study conducted at the City University of New York (CUNY) found the COMPASS writing exam to be lacking a sufficient diagnostic to determine student competency for collegial level writing which resulted in meetings to discuss a new course of action (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011). This decision by the faculty of the English department at CUNY was unanimous. The English professors then went on to design their own exam with a writing prompt more fitting to the future needs of the students entering college. Additionally, the math instructors at CUNY found the COMPASS to be unpredictable due to its random process of assigning an inconsistent number of questions and, thus, do not provide a comprehensive picture of a student’s skills (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011). This issue is problematic when college advisers are attempting to determine whether the student is college ready or in need of remediation.

The college entrance exam (CEE), used at ACC and other community colleges is often viewed as a predictor of educational health. However, as Merritt (2008) stated in his report that college entrance exams do not reflect the holistic assessment of learning during high school and should not be used as the only means of determining

the academic ability of prospective students. Nevertheless, many admissions officers and placement specialists view the CEE to determine whether students require remediation or are ready for collegiate level coursework (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011). Prior to allowing remedial students access to college-level courses, those students must again take the CEE test and attain a passing score before the student can have access to collegial level coursework. Thus, placement specialists deem, whether intentional or not, success in remediation is determined by a successful score on the CEE. However, the remedial courses students are placed in, as a result, of the CEE utilized are not obviously improving outcomes (Boatman & Long, 2010; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Jaggars & Hodara, 2011; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010; Scott-Clayton, 2012). This developmental course passage policy is currently in effect at ACC which utilizes the COMPASS test for its CEE assessments.

There has been limited research regarding the predictive validity of the COMPASS test outside of the developers themselves (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Many researchers have questioned whether relying unconditionally on the COMPASS for course placement is an acceptable practice (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Bailey et al., 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Falcone, 2011; Veenstra, 2009). The COMPASS has been identified as the most used CEE, with 19.05% employing its use (Primary Research Group, Inc., 2008). Nevertheless, colleges and universities continue to maintain the practice.

When students score below one of the many cut-off scores established by different colleges, they are often placed into remedial courses designed to bring their scholastic level up to college standards. Bailey et al. (2010) examined the remediation process acutely through a longitudinal study and discovered a disturbing trend. The researchers used a database sample of over 250,000 students from 57 colleges in several states as part of the Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative. The study differentiated between a single remedial course and a sequence of courses designed to remediate students. Depending on where the student placed on an entrance exam score, determined whether they needed one course or a sequence of courses (Bailey et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, Bailey et al. (2010) concluded, “only 16% completed their math sequences within 3 years, and fewer than 10% passed a college-level math course within that period” (p. 31). Additionally, fewer than 50% finished their first courses. Bailey et al. (2010) admitted their sample may not represent all community college students, but their results were positively correlated with the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988. Other studies have also found remediation offers little in the way of success for students (Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). These conclusions provide further evidence of the problems with remedial coursework and CEE’s as very few students complete these courses successfully, thus, contributing to the student retention problem.

As cited in Scott-Clayton (2012), Bailey et al. (2010) found that 59% of the 250,000 students studied were referred to remedial math and a lesser number were

referred to remedial English. Bailey et al. (2010) further discovered that students who ignored the placement test results and enrolled into college-level coursework had only a slightly lower success rate than their peers who placed directly into those classes. Students who ignored the remedial placement had a much higher success rate than those students who tested into remediation and complied with the placement suggestion.

With no standardized cut-off score, there is much consensus concerning the inability of the COMPASS to predict college-level success (Fields & Parsad, 2012). These inconsistencies regarding the cut-off scores appropriated by higher education institutions do not provide a clear understanding if the predictive validity of the cut-off scores adopted legitimately informs the student and advisor regarding freshman grade point averages and degree completion. A recent article in a journal focusing on developmental coursework the authors discovered that only 35 states have developed policies outlining placement in developmental education, and some have established cut-off scores but continue to allow institutions to define their own cut-off scores for those implemented assessments instruments further confounding the entrance conundrum (Wilson, 2012).

For the purposes of this study, success is when a student who, (a) completes remediation coursework with a 'C' or better or (b) attains a "college ready" score on the CEE, continues the following semester and completes a collegial level course with a passing grade. Being able to predict success requires not just one assessment, but

also a battery of information regarding the student's abilities. Additionally, once placed in a series of coursework, an intrusive approach to advising compared to a disengaged program has shown to have some success at those institutions using the approach. Intrusive advising demands the faculty member to make multiple contacts with the new student in order to develop a relationship of concern whereby the student feels connected to the institution (Schwebel, Walburn, Klyce, & Jerrolds, 2012). There are many factors which can contribute to the success of student retention, as outlined by Tinto (2012), and putting the student first will enable the student to connect with those who can offer the best support.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used within this study and are defined here for a higher degree of understanding.

College Entrance Exams (CEE): Those exams employed by institutions of higher education to inform students and advisors of the academic level of the applicant (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Course Placement: Those practices utilized by colleges to determine which courses are best suited for the student's academic ability (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011).

High stakes testing: The assessments employed by colleges to gain data regarding the academic ability of first-year students (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013).

Retention: The act of retaining students within an institution to continue to degree completion (Tinto, 2012).

Student Attrition: A term associated with those students who leave college before completing their degree plans (Abu, Adera, Kamsani, & Ametepee, 2012).

Student Success: A term which identifies students passing their initial collegiate level course with a “C” or better (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Student Persistence: The ability of the student to continue in their course of study until completion of their degree plan. (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Significance of the Study

With the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) in 1965, and with the 110th Congress amending the law in 2008, institutions of higher education are required to disclose certain information to the public; allowing for students and parents to make a more informed decision of where to attend (National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, 2009). In response to the amended HEOA, ACC reported its students’ retention rate of the first-time fall 2010 cohort as 48%. Over half of the students who begin their academic journey at the small town based community college leave before their second year. Consequently, these sobering statistics create a tremendous drain on the local human capital and institutional resources. Research indicates that many students who drop out of community colleges do not reenroll, limiting their future employment prospects (Boatman & Long, 2010; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Jaggars & Hodara, 2011; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010; Scott-Clayton, 2012). All of these

undesirable outcomes often lead to a negative impression among policy makers and the public.

Even more significant is the state funding formula is now tied directly to an institution's retention rate and if improvements are not noted then a further reduction in funding could result. Recently the Arkansas Legislature mandated the Arkansas Department of Higher Education to base some of the funding to its public universities and colleges to be tied directly to the retention scores at each institution (NCSL , 2015). With this in mind, there is no question the retention issue needs a viable solution to answer the possibility of reduced funding. Arguably, because many researchers suggest the COMPASS placement test may be of questionable reliability, utilizing it as a first line placement tool is a practice which most certainly requires careful consideration.

There was a time when the COMPASS was widely used. However, due to the increasing research studies indicating that relying on COMPASS scores to determine student placement courses at the collegial level may not be supported by the evidence, the developers of the exam have opted to discontinue its use (ACT, 2015; Adams, 2012; Barr, Rasor, & Grill, 2002; Hiss & Franks, 2014). The lack of evidence supporting the use of COMPASS has direct implications for ACC. The community college has never conducted an evaluation of COMPASS based course placement practices. Additionally, no other post-secondary institutions in Arkansas conducted a thorough evaluation of the efficacy of their placement testing programs. When conducting a search in Google Scholar, EBSCO, and ERIC, there were no published studies addressing placement

policies, as they are related to the COMPASS examination, in higher education in Arkansas.

To compound the issue, the Arkansas State Legislature recently reformed the funding formula for higher education to include retention and recruitment statistics (NCSL , 2015). In order to address part of this issue, ACC raised its COMPASS reading admission standards to 62, which arguably still leaves the placement issue still in question. With the knowledge of over half of entering freshman, given their past high school performance and lack of readiness for college-level course work, are required to enroll in developmental or remedial courses, there remains much to examine (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). 48% of students, confronted with so many academic challenges, drop out during that first year enrolled at the college. It is important to investigate how ACC can use the COMPASS test more effectively to improve students' success in their first college courses and ultimately improve overall student persistence to degree completion.

Arguably, all facets of research, theory development, and informed decisions among higher education require multiple avenues of data in order to make an educated verdict. Providing a wider base of research where placement specialists could draw on more information could reap huge benefits. The results of this study could provide insights which may lead to improvements to ACC's placement process. It would provide immense benefits to ACC and its students through increasing success rates and thus

improving retention rates which relate directly to the new funding formula developed by the state of Arkansas.

The study could provide the decision makers at ACC the more information they need to explore ways to improve how ACC conducts placement testing. Determining a revised *modus operandi* to place new students in courses may ensure an improved retention score for ACC and assist students in reaching their educational goals.

Research Questions

This study employed a qualitative research design, which was driven by post-positivist conceptual framework allowing the data to guide the study (see Creswell, 2012). Archival data already compiled by the college was utilized to analyze the success rates of those students who took the COMPASS exam and either failed or successfully completed a collegial level course. This information determined the investigative inquiry and the direction of the qualitative study. The data was based on four groups of recent freshmen who enrolled in the previous four semesters, and went through the placement process using the COMPASS. Their attrition rates and course passing rates were analyzed. Using these data, interviews were conducted with the stakeholders to inform them of the findings and to seek their feedback. Depending on the findings, additional interview questions have been generated and included into the study.

I posed four research questions to examine the relationship between the COMPASS test results and any expected lack of student success in both developmental and collegiate coursework at ACC. I conducted interviews with key ACC stakeholders to

determine their general opinions on course placement strategies and discuss the findings from the archival data. In addition to the stakeholders, I interviewed four groups of freshmen and four groups of sophomores and allowed these students the opportunity to share their insights into their placement process.

The study was guided by four research questions seeking to answer whether there is a consensus among the stakeholders interviewed regarding the collected archival data and the interviews conducted with the student cohorts.

1. How useful is the COMPASS entrance exam in placing students into college-level courses to facilitate their future academic success?
2. Students: What do you believe should be the components placement specialists should examine while determining a placement recommendation?
3. Students/Faculty: What other issues explain why some students fail to finish their coursework?
4. Administrators/Faculty: What are the faculty and staff impressions of the course placement practices at ACC? And what would they recommend improving placement practices? What benefits or negative impacts did you perceive from using the COMPASS Exam?

Review of the Literature

If one completes a web search using Google, Bing, and WorldCat on the subject of COMPASS or ACT exams validity, few studies appear that do not have the stamp of approval from American College Testing (ACT) (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Additionally, databases such as ERIC, EBSCO, Education Research Complete were also searched with similar results. Other researchers have noted this issue in their discourse (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Scott-Clayton, 2012). The implications of ignoring placement problems are far reaching and can have an impact on multiple areas within higher education, not to mention the conundrums students can experience as a consequence (Hiss & Franks, 2014). In order to grasp the intricate results of inconsistent placement policies, one must examine the areas subjected to the repercussions. The reliability concerns with the COMPASS exam can have consequences related to retention, student persistence, student success, and developmental programs which can illuminate themselves by damaging the college's reputation. Thus, the literature review will include an examination of those areas in order to develop a strong case for the need of this investigation.

Theoretical Framework

In order to thoroughly examine the many consequences of placement errors, it is a matter of concern to gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical framework which will shape this study. Vincent Tinto (1975) advanced his theory of student persistence by explaining the need for students to integrate and assimilate into the higher education environment. Tinto has since modified his theory by adopting a dual responsibility between both the student and the institution. In his new book, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*, Tinto (2012) adapted a sociological model placing the responsibility of retention on both parties. It is of high

importance the institution invests itself into creating a culture conducive to new students by adopting policies and providing support to those recent inductees beginning their academic journeys. Tinto (2012) stipulated the importance of the classroom and its dominance in the predictability of students staying in school versus those who leave. Redesigning the classroom experience to provide a learner-centered paradigm instead of the institutional paradigm has been proposed by many to meet the needs of today's digital students (Tagg, 2003; Tinto, 2012). Students must integrate into the academic biome in order to feel accepted and socially invested, which is why it is important to develop placement practices which enhance the classroom experience.

Retention

One of the many problems colleges, including ACC, is contending with is the retention of first-year students. Tinto (2017, 2012, 2006), considered one of the pioneers of student retention research, equated the loss in first-year students as a leak in the system which needs to be corrected. Yet Cohen and Brawer (2008) argued the reasons for the dropout rate are varied and some are far outside the control of individual institutions. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting a major portion of the freshman retention conundrum is directly linked to academic preparedness (Complete College America, 2012; Mannson, 2016; Tinto, 2012). Past studies have indicated that over 50% of students entering community colleges require

some remedial courses due to less than proficient scores on college placement exams (Complete College America, 2012).

To compound the problem, the retention rate is far worse for those students' classified in low socioeconomic levels which are a large portion of the populace around ACC. Falcone (2011) reported "this cohort, only 47% of students from the lowest family income level attained a bachelor's degree after five years" (p. 3). Community colleges are the worst impacted on this level as many of their first-year students are those classified as low income. ACC reported their retention rate during the 2011-2012 academic year at 48% which reflects a much lower score than the national average as reported by Falcone (2011).

Some studies indicate there is a plethora of evidence available indicating at least some of the retention issues are directly related to some placement errors due to COMPASS scores (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Students who are incorrectly placed into developmental courses can find themselves facing increased costs and a longer road to degree completion which inevitably causes them to become less integrated into the college, thus, creating a loss in human capital (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). This loss in human capital is both socially degrading and extremely expensive to the national economy, leaving the United States falling behind some of its economic adversaries (Mullin, 2012). There are many barriers for students to overcome as they begin their college experience, one being academic preparedness (Cho & Karp, 2013; Pruett & Absher, 2015). Most colleges have adopted some form of support system for

those students enrolled in their first semester. The aforementioned barrier takes a heavy toll as research has indicated that only a little over 40% of today's students finish their degree (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). Another study mentioned that only 27% of students in the low socioeconomic realm even make it to graduation (Rodrigues & Le, 2011). There exists no limitation on evidence of the monumental problem student retention plays in the day-to-day operations of any collegial campus.

One of the leading researchers in the field of student attrition, Dr. Vincent Tinto, has published many articles and books on the subject. Tinto's model outlines the importance of integration or developing "a sense of belonging" which provides the student with a sense of ownership towards their education and the institution they attend (Tinto, 2012). However, this feeling erodes as the student experiences academic difficulties which often result in the student leaving the course, and the college, for an extended period of time. Inadequate course placement can feed students into this statistic of poor retention.

Student Persistence

Universities and colleges across the nation have been relentlessly attempting to overcome the issues relating to student persistence for many decades. Nevertheless, statistics has shown the student persistence rates have changed little over the past 5 years regardless of the programs employed (Bailey et al., 2010; Burdman, 2012; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Falcone, 2011; Slinger, Berg, Fisk, & Hanson, 2015).

The student persistence problem, and the reasons many students decline to continue until degree completion, could very well owe some of its reputation to the arguably questionable practices connected to the COMPASS exam and its wide variation of adopted cut scores. Fields and Parsad (2012) found so many variances in the COMPASS cut scores, they questioned whether post-secondary schools nationwide held a fine tuned approach of what it means to be academically prepared. This inconsistency gives rise to questions of how the developers of the COMPASS test can put forth reliability arguments in light of the variations evident in the cut scores (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Fields and Parsad (2012), of the National Assessment Governing Board, found COMPASS cut-off score variations to be the largest among the entrance exams. They reported the lowest cut score on the algebra portion of the test was 15 and the highest an 86. The variations in the reading cut-off scores were similar with 20 being the lowest and 91 being the highest (Fields & Parsad, 2012). These wide variations provide evidence for the need for national standards regarding entrance exams.

Conley (2010) confirms the ability of each institution to set its own cut scores and questions how the definition of readiness varies across the nation. This variation of readiness creates a philosophical dilemma where “x” in one institution does not mean the same as “x” in another, lending evidence to the inconsistencies in educational practice. An algebra course at one institution requires a specific level academic ability and the course in another institution may require a much different

level of intellectual mathematical ability. This is further evidence of the great divide existing between K-12 and post-secondary education in which the two entities are so separated by government policies that neither knows what the other is doing in concerning educating individuals. Boswell (2001) noted, when compared to other nations, the “American K-12 and higher education systems are among the world’s least-linked educational structures” (p. 4). The lack of consistency is not a surprise for those who delve into the cut score dilemma as there are no regulated cut scores for entrance exams. Providing the tools for student persistence means aligning educational standards with all academic institutions allowing for students to succeed in college.

Student Success and Remediation

Student success is one issue all higher education institutions find at the core of their mission statement. The contributing factors to lower than expected student success are wide and varied. Interestingly enough, the one trait many students have in common is low academic preparedness resulting in the inability to attain acceptable grades (Adams, 2012; Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Bailey et al., 2010; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Falcone, 2011; Tinto, 2012; Veenstra, 2009). Once students begin to have academic challenges, they often become disenchanted with their college experience. They begin to the process of disconnecting from higher education contributing to the attrition statistics reported by colleges and universities.

Remediation courses have been under increased scrutiny as to their questionable contribution to graduation rates and access to higher education

(Complete College America, 2012). Jaggars and Hodara (2011) found similar results in their study conducted at CUNY. Often, when students are placed into a remedial course, they find themselves embarrassed by the prospect of being remediated and leave the college prior to completing the course with no future plans to return. This form of disengagement is directly addressed in Tinto's model of student persistence as estrangement from the college culture or the lack of student integration into the institution both academically and culturally (Tinto, 2012, 2006, 1975). Placement errors can directly result in the flight of students from higher education as a result of remedial courses.

Today's community colleges harbor a high percentage of students who are classified as lacking academic preparedness. The inability to perform on a collegial academic level contributes directly to only 33% of students graduating with some form of credential from community colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Studies have indicated that the further a student places from an entrance exam cut-off score, the less likely they will persist in college (Bremer et al., 2013). These findings are supported by Boatman and Long (2010) who reported that students who took the COMPASS exam and were close to the cut-off score were at a high risk of not completing their degrees within six years. Reading is the only remedial subject which showed a strong relationship to retention. Those students who took and passed a developmental reading course were more likely to persist to completion and attain a higher GPA (Bremer et al., 2013). This statistic relates the importance of placement advisors

examining a student's record holistically when considering remediation rather than relying on their COMPASS scores alone. The evidence has brought us directly to the issue of student support and the impact of CEE's, which has been ideologically identified as one of the factors necessary to enhance retention of first-year freshman.

Student Support

The initial layer of student support is located in the admissions advising office of any university or college, as it is the admission's advisor who steers the new student towards academic success and attainment of their career goals. However, prior to the student walking into the admission's advisor's office most will take some form of entrance exam to establish a baseline for their academic knowledge (Achieve Inc., 2007). If the student has not taken the SAT or ACT, they will be ushered into the testing office to have the COMPASS or ACCUPLACER proctored. Additionally, the state of Arkansas requires all students to take a placement exam (ADHE, 2017). It is at this point that many students are putting their entire trust in an individual to guide them through the labyrinth of decisions providing them with a roadmap towards success.

Placement Exams

The placement exam is often utilized as a diagnostic report on academic success where the scores from those assessments often prescribe what courses the new student can take. The attention these entrance exams have been attracting over the last few years has put their validity into question. Recent studies challenged the assumption that these

placement exams improve a student's ability to achieve academic success (Bailey et al., 2010; Hodara et al., 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010;). Scott-Clayton's (2012) study assessed over 70,000 student records at a large urban community college system and determined through her research a very feeble correlation between the use of entrance exams, such as the COMPASS, and student success. The researcher developed a set of metrics by which to measure whether the COMPASS test was valid and found high error rates in the area of placement and success. Another study using the same metrics found the same results, but in a statewide community college system. This study raised further questions through a qualitative investigation of the resourcefulness of using the COMPASS results for placement in developmental education (Belfield & Crosta, 2012). Belfield and Crosta (2012) did not evaluate the test themselves, but how the data was utilized in placement decisions. This study offered further credence to the results of other studies which indicate placement exams do not provide a complete picture of a student's ability to perform (Adams, 2012).

There has been some attention garnered by those colleges that allow optional standardized testing policies. Optional testing allows students to make their own decisions whether to take an entrance exam or enroll directly in collegiate courses. A study completed by Hiss and Franks (2014) found no correlation between success in collegial level coursework and the submission of entrance examination scores when students have strong high school grade point averages. Hiss and Frank's study is further

indication of the low correlation between student success and scores on the COMPASS entrance examination.

Implications

It is the hope of this study to continue to add to the literature, ways for the improvement of higher education in order to provide our future students with better opportunities of success. Yet change in any situation is often fraught with difficult circumstances. During my twenty five years of experience in education, new theories and research have triggered changes in the learning environment enabling students to experience success, but also to become higher level learners so they can meet the challenges of the future. However, very few of those changes remain. Change only lasts when it becomes the new behavior which is rooted into the social norm (Kotter, 2012). “Anchoring change also requires that sufficient time be taken to ensure that the next generation of management really does personify the new approach (Kotter, 2012; p. 15). Change can be an often painful, uncomfortable, and difficult process for all involved. If the faculty and staff have been subjected to many failed change efforts, they will often view the new initiative as someone reinventing the wheel.

If the change effort is brought into the existing culture, utilizing high-quality leadership and a multi-step process, the anchoring of the new initiative will have a higher success rate. Kotter (2012) proposed eight steps to bring about transformation.

1. Establish a sense of urgency by identifying the crisis at hand.
2. Creating the guiding coalition of collaborative institutional leaders.

3. Develop a vision to direct the change effort and a strategy to achieve the vision.
4. Effectively communicating the change vision to faculty and staff.
5. Empowering broad-based action by removing obstacles, changing systems or structures, and encouraging risk taking.
6. Generating short-term wins and recognizing those who achieve those wins.
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change by hiring, or promoting people who believe in the change process.
8. Anchoring new approaches into the culture by noting the successes achieved by the change and communicating those to other members of the culture (Kotter, 2012; p. 23).

An organization, such as a college or university, can bring about transformation by following all of the steps suggested above. Each of the eight steps put forth by Kotter (2012) can, and often should be, broken up into smaller steps in order to lessen the impact. One of the most important factors of establishing a new system is the administration must lead by example. Additionally, as the change process is experienced, challenges will arise and the leadership will have to address those issues and allow the effort to move through those difficult obstructions.

I hope that my research will improve course placement practices at ACC and ultimately help more students achieve their educational goals. These new initiatives will require a culture conducive to change. Developing a new mindset on the course

placement practices will endeavor to improve the student's ability to persist and reach those educational milestones important to achieving their goals. This study will question the placement practices with high hopes of developing a revised system enabling ACC to outperform its local competitors and continue to meet the needs of its stakeholders.

Summary

The focus of this project study is to determine what relationships exist between COMPASS scores, placement, attrition, and course success and then present that data to the stakeholders to gain their feedback. The reason this study wishes to address this issue is because ACC reports higher attrition rates than the national averages for community colleges. More importantly, there is a growing body of literature indicating the course placement practices may have negative influence on student persistence. Ultimately, this study should assist students with higher education goals to meet the challenges and complete their degrees or certificates. Additionally, this study could have an impact on the funding the college receives if the data collected results in positive social change and collectively improves the retention rate of future cohorts of students.

The question regarding entrance examinations has been the focus of a few studies and many of those studies have questioned the validity of CEE's. In 2009, a professor with 15 years of experience in higher education at Temple University decided to retake the ACT and SAT exams. The decision to do this was a direct result

of preparing the professor's daughter for the SAT and knowledge of a report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling advising colleges to reduce their reliance on the scores (Harper & Vanderbei, 2009). The two professors, Harper and Vanderbei, found the tests focused more on the time required to take each section which, in their opinion, was unsuccessful in determining the knowledge level of students. The SAT comprises 10 sections on writing, reading, and math which had no correlation. In other words, the test taker might start with writing and then jump to math and then to reading and so forth. Additionally, the one minute allowed to answer questions was cited by the authors as inadequate at assessing any form of "critical analysis or contemplation."

After completing the ACT a month later, Harper and Vanderbei (2009) continued to criticize the critical analysis measurement of the exam as they were allowed so little time to evaluate the prompts and answer the question. Professors noted they too were slow readers in high school and continued to be slow at reading which created a lower score than should have been. At the conclusion of the study, both professors discovered the SAT and ACT failed to measure what they really knew. They recommended what 55 other institutions in the United States have done, and that is to make the entrance exam optional for their new students.

This finding again raises the question about the validity of the ACT, SAT, and the COMPASS as it relates to making placement decisions for prospective college students. This study hopes to formulate a clearer picture for administrators and faculty

of the importance of examining prospective students holistically and only using the entrance examination scores as a guide. Through the use of a qualitative methodological approach, I intend on using previously collected archival quantitative data to drive the qualitative method of the study and formulate a rich narrative based both on hard data and collaborative discussions.

The remainder of the study will present how the study was conducted and the findings. Section 2 will provide the reader with an outline of the methodology utilized in this study. It will address how the participants were interviewed and protected. Additionally, the data collection, analysis process, and results will be presented assuring accuracy and credibility. Section 3 will deliver the results of the study and linking the results to the local needs. Also in this section a scholarly review of the literature will be conducted demonstrating saturation of peer-reviewed sources and connecting how the current research supports the findings of this study. A project description will be presented giving the reader any potential barriers and possible solutions to those barriers along with the roles and responsibilities of the participants. Section 4 will provide the strengths and limitations of the study and any possible alternative approaches. A reflective perspective describing what was learned about the research process including a reflective analysis and any implications for social changed.

Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

This study was focused on determining whether the COMPASS entrance exam is an adequate assessment to determine placement in collegial level courses. I was interested in learning, through the archival data collected by the college and the empirical opinions of the stakeholders, whether they had confidence in the test as a placement tool. Consequently, in order to draft a solid narrative, it is necessary to use a qualitative research method to add to the epistemological database of placement practices and entrance examinations. I chose to use a basic qualitative methodology so the data, as it is gathered, led the study instead of trying to fit the results into a set of preconceived conclusions.

This study may provide information which indicates whether the COMPASS exam is an effective assessment for student placement. Therefore, it is important to collect unbiased data through the use of interview guides. The choice of a rooted narrative, through the use of an interview guide anchored with archival data, answered the aforementioned question of COMPASS usefulness in course placement. My examination was not an evaluation of reliability of the COMPASS in a quantitative study. Rather, this effort was an exploration to determine if COMPASS is an effective means to place students in courses as determined by the stakeholders. If I limited my study to quantitative data, it would miss the extremely important part of human interpretive ontological side. Therefore, I implemented a basic qualitative

methodology which was needed to provide the campus stakeholders with a clean narrative with which to examine current placement procedures, and to determine if any changes would benefit the college.

Merriam (2009) promotes the qualitative method as a study grounded in the data. Although a deep narrative is a necessary result in qualitative research, the ultimate result of a qualitative design is its ability to further confirm an existing conceptual framework. Collecting the data are dependent on the direction the information collected as it relates to the conceptual framework generated (Merriam, 2009). The data was continuously compared and analyzed to determine whether a pattern existed which supported the study's conceptual framework. The data were constantly arranged in categories depending on the relationship observed or analyzed. Thus, an important strength in this type of qualitative research is that the hypothesis was in a constant state of flux; it evolved as the data were collected and compared. Qualitative research is inductive by nature which is where its reliability is anchored (Merriam, 2009).

Creswell (2012) further supported this methodology by stating, "In qualitative inquiry, the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon." (p. 206). The process which was examined by this study is the placement of students by the use of the scores generated by the COMPASS test. The conceptual framework was tested as the data were collected instead of having a theory already developed and seeking the data which supports an

evolving hypothesis (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) advocates that the basic qualitative method is self-correcting, as the developing conceptual framework is driven by data. Qualitative methodology is flexible as it allows the researcher to have a conceptual framework in process as described by Larson (1997). Additionally, the data can be presented as visual, a series of propositions, and finally a rich narrative which explains the supportive role the data plays in the established conceptual framework.

To substantiate the need for a qualitative study, the other methods will be examined and their collection styles were be shown as inadequate or unnecessary. Because the college has already collected the quantitative data needed to provide a framework for this study, it would be redundant to only use quantitative methodology in this study. The survey designs typically are used to understand trends in society, beliefs, or individual opinions about societal issues (Creswell, 2012). They can be very time consuming and are often used in a longitudinal study which, in the case of determining validity of COMPASS as a placement exam, was not needed (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010; Merriam, 2009). Ethnographic designs are used to study specific groups of people regarding their behavior, thought process, and semantic practices. This design establishes an general illustration of a group and did not fit into the goal of this study as I am not studying groups but rather a broad process: placement practices (see Creswell, 2012). A narrative research design would also be an awkward fit for this study as the

narrative design focuses mainly on the stories people tell about their lives and experiences (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). There exists few qualitative explanations of the COMPASS entrance exam and its relationship to the placement process. Therefore, the basic qualitative method is the most appropriate choice because it allows the researcher to continually review the underlying conceptual framework as the study moves forward.

Creswell (2012) also suggested using a six-step process in conducting a basic qualitative study. The foremost step is keeping in mind the inductive nature of this type of study so the researcher can produce broad narratives. The second step is understanding that the collection and analysis of the data occurs on a concurrent basis which, for this study, would mean reviewing the archival data while collecting the empirical data from the stakeholders. The third step occurs at the same time as the second is occurring. If after reviewing the data, the researcher can return to a stakeholder and gain more information to fill in any gaps in the data. The fourth step involves reading and re-reading the data, analyzing it each time, thus, gaining a deeper understanding of the evidence collected. The fifth step incorporates coding the data into categories where the number of categories depends on the size of the database. The final step involves validating the existing conceptual framework and sharing the data and analysis with the stakeholders to determine whether they agree with the researcher's findings. The final step involves writing the research report and disclosing the findings from my own interpretation.

Participants

For this study, it was important to select both students, faculty, and administrators so as to gather feedback from multiple levels of stakeholders. Creswell (2012) described types of sampling approaches associated with purposeful sampling which Creswell states is the sampling method used in qualitative research. Creswell (2012) continues by breaking down the different types of purposeful sampling into subcategories. This study employed homogenous sampling which Creswell (2012) describes as individuals sampled based on membership in a specific subgroup. For this study, the subgroup was students who were placed after taking the COMPASS entrance exam. The number of participants was limited to a few individuals which is typical in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) states, “this is because the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual” (p. 209).

Students

According to the institutions website, the student body at ACC consist of 2,423 students, of which 76% were full-time. Of those 2,423 students, 38% were male and 62% were female with the average student age being 25 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Some of the students that attend ACC end up transferring to a four-year institution to further their education, and others seek to complete an associates program or attain a certificate for a specific career which they

have chosen. As of the 2013 cohort, the first year to second year retention rate at the college of full time students was 49% and the part-time retention rate was 41%.

The college serves the surrounding six counties which consists mostly of a rural population, many of those are of low-socioeconomic status (United States Department of Commerce, 2010). The service area population is predominately white with a minority percentage of around 12% (United States Department of Commerce, 2010). The poverty level in the six surrounding counties is higher than that of the national average being just below 15%.

The Institutional Research (IR) Department, which is located on the campus, maintains an array of institutional enrollment databases. My study employed one of the IR dataset of students who began their trek towards completion for the past two years. Because ACC is a two-year institution, there were four groups of students to be included in this study examined. The IR Office at ACC indicated that it has complete records for all entering ACC students, who took the COMPASS exam and their subsequent performance in courses for which the students were placed. The college narrows down the cohorts of new students by the placement tests which were administered and then the courses for which those students were enrolled. The institutional research department at ACC maintains records on whether those students passed their courses and persisted or failed.

Four groups of current students were chosen for my study. Group 1 consisted of freshmen who are enrolled in remedial coursework as a result of either the

COMPASS or the ACT, and Group 2 were those freshmen who tested into collegial level courses. Group 3 consisted of those sophomores who completed through the first semester in remedial courses and continued into collegial level courses, and Group 4 were sophomores who persisted from their first year to the second. The 5 participants per group were selected depending on the availability of students who meet the criteria mentioned above and this number coincides with Creswell's recommendations (Creswell, 2012).

It is possible some of the students may feel uncomfortable participating in this study as they may feel their status at ACC may be compromised. Participants were assured of their confidentiality and they could opt in or out of the study at their discretion. With the four years of archival data, I did not need to establish a researcher-participant relationship as information on students was provided via an institutional database, and with those students involved in the interviews the relationship between the researcher and the participants was strictly professional in nature. It is important to take measured steps to ensure their privacy and anonymity. To ensure their privacy any names were changed to a numerical label and the data collected is kept in a secure location. Additionally, all regulations set forth by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) was strictly adhered to in order for the safety of all participants.

Faculty

In order to gain a well-rounded and holistic view of the results found regarding the COMPASS exam results as they pertain to success, I felt it was necessary to include the faculty members which provide instruction in the remedial and Freshman courses. I interviewed instructors who teach English, math, Algebra, and reading remedial courses as they would likely share crucial information in the respective courses. Additionally, I interviewed faculty members who teach Freshman English, and College Algebra, as they too, would have compelling information regarding the readiness of those freshmen who tested into regular collegial courses. I intend to interview at least one instructor from each discipline in order to establish a holistic view of the COMPASS data and how it relates to student's success which should not exceed 6 individuals. My relationship with any of the faculty is professional in nature. Because I am not employed by the institution this also reduced any bias between myself and faculty responses in my interviews.

To protect the faculty's right to privacy and anonymity none of their names was be published in the study. Furthermore, each faculty participant was afforded their rights to cease the interview at any time of their choosing. The safety of the participants were protected according to the NIH and Walden's IRB standards. The Access and Provision of Rights section below fully outlines the procedures to ensure all of these issues are followed.

Administrators

After the data are collected and assimilated from the student groups and faculty members, I will share the findings with the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellors, and Directors to gain their feedback. These meetings will take place at the consent and time of choosing of the administrators and will be conducted after the conclusion of the study in order to provide the study with the holistic picture of the issues regarding placement using the COMPASS entrance exam.

Participant Access

ACC access to the participants was granted only by the institution and the participants themselves through the Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs. I also set up an appointment with the Vice-Chancellor to present a letter outlining the study along with the interview protocols. Additionally, the letter allowed the college to establish the times for the interviews and monitor those participants as they see fit. The letter also disclosed the steps I implemented to protect the participant's privacy and protection of rights.

Merriam (2009) outlined the need to establish a good rapport with subjects, which if a good one can elicit rich and elaborate explanations thus providing higher quality data. Upon their consent to the interviews, I sought to establish a positive rapport at the beginning of the interview sessions and began with a full disclosure to the participants of their rights and that they in no way are required to participate and can be excused at any time before, during, or after the session. Additionally, I

explained the reason behind the research project to foster a relationship built on trust and that the results of the study were made available to them at the conclusion.

Refreshments were available to allow for a relaxed environment.

When conducting research in the field it is of the utmost importance for the researcher to guard the rights and privacy of those human subjects and institutional entities involved. To protect the institution's anonymity all references to the college have been changed to protect the institution and its stakeholders. In August of 2016, I completed the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research course on "Protecting Human Research Participants," (Certificate Number 1224924) as further demonstration of my commitment to the safety of research participants.

After the data from the interviews are collected and analyzed the transcribed information is stored in an encrypted file on my computer and on a flash drive. The stored data include raw data, research logs, and reflective journals. No persons will have access to the data outside of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), University Research Review (URR), and my doctoral committee at Walden University. The IRB approval number provided by Walden University is 10-14-16-0225053. The actual name of the institution has been changed to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Measures of Protection and Participant Rights

As stated in Merriam (2009), the ethical considerations which are embedded in a research study contribute a great deal to the validity and reliability of the study.

Nevertheless, it is vital that a researcher hold the rights of the participants in a very high

level even above the successful conclusion of any study conducted. And because this is true in this study it is important to note that guidelines will be adhered to in strict sense of the term.

Bogden and Biklen (2007) set forth a set of ethical guidelines which should guide all research studies. The guidelines recommend avoiding sites where the participants could feel pressured or coerced to participate due to the researcher being employed by the institution. It is also important to honor everyone's anonymity and to be transparent regarding the amount of time the interviews took. This study also honored all the terms the participants agreed with to do the study. Additionally, it is important the findings are truthfully represented in the study. Bogden & Biklen (2007) firmly stated, "Fabricating or distorting data are the ultimate sin of the scientist" (p. 50).

In order to maintain a sense of anonymity, none of the participants' names will be published in the final report and the data collected has been stored in a safe secure location. During the interviews conducted, under no circumstances were any participants subjected to any physical or emotional distress and each participant knew well in advance of the interview that their participation was completely voluntary, and those participants can cease the interview at any time without repercussions.

Data Collection

Creswell (2012) developed the theoretical framework to visualize the procedures for conducting a basic qualitative conceptual framework study through the use of an emerging design. His approach allows the study to be guided by the data

collected and through such guidance a well-grounded conclusion may emerge. Thus, there exists a clean data guided study which does not force the data into certain categories but allows the study to develop its own during the process. This means as I continued to ask questions the responses of the participants led to new questions and answers which enabled the conceptual framework to develop as the interviews were ongoing.

Archival Data

The initial phase of the study centered on collecting the archival data from the college's Institutional Research Department (IR) from the previous four years. The information from the IR was compiled and placed into a table via Excel. Within the table, the college's IR has placed the student's demographic profile along with the individual's content area COMPASS scores, and whether if the students were passing or persisted to college-level coursework as a result of the scores earned by the COMPASS test. It is this content area, these data points informed me if a problem existed after placing a student using the COMPASS scores. My goal was to establish whether the COMPASS test is an effective tool to collect academic preparedness data for placement considerations.

The IR Office collected the student's information in the form of COMPASS scores and then tracks the persistence of those students until they either leave the institution or graduate with a diploma or certificate. I examined all the core content areas to determine whether students who were placed using the COMPASS scores

persisted by attaining passing grades of a “C” or better in their developmental and collegial level courses. Compiling these data and with my further analysis answered whether there is a relationship between placement and attrition with using the COMPASS test as a major component in the placement process. This information is available in Figure 2. This phase of the study was the first step in establishing whether a possible problem existed with the COMPASS scores and gave credence to continuing with the guided study.

Interviews

In the second portion of my study I conducted interviews with faculty, students, and administrators seeking their interpretations of their experiences while using the COMPASS exam scores. Interviewing is an important tool in the gathering of data in qualitative research. The interview encourages discourse about a certain topic and can produce straightforward answers to questions sought in a qualitative research design. I employed the interview to seek answers to questions which arise due to the archival data analysis process. Faculty, administrators, and four cohorts of students were interviewed in response to the archival data results. The interview data informed me whether the stakeholders at the college believe the COMPASS exam contributes to the attrition or retention of students.

The interview guide used was self-published as there were none available that would satisfy the research questions in my study. I included questions such as how long the student has been at the college, the courses they have taken, and to share their

experiences as they went through the placement process. Faculty members were questioned regarding their opinion as to why some students were not successful in their courses. Each interview session was recorded on a mini-recording device. The participants had full knowledge that each session would be recorded and the tapes are going to be kept in a secure location. I conducted the interviews on the campus of the College and were completed in a common area available for informal meetings and conversation.

At the beginning of the interview I disclosed what the study is researching and the rights of each of the participants. Furthermore, all participants read and if they agreed signed a consent form which included their permissions to record the sessions and that once the recordings were transcribed to allow each of the participants to read the transcript to ensure member checking (see Merriam, 2009). Through member checking the reliability of the data was increased and resulted in a higher degree of credibility within the study.

Interview Guide

Interview guides provided me with both the opportunity to gain valuable research information with its open-ended questions, but also because most of the subjects interviewed were conducted face-to-face in a group setting thus allowing the researcher to also observe any relative behaviors. Each of the interview sessions was semi-structured also known as a “loose guide, with general questions designed to open up conversation about the topic” (see Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, p. 1). The advantages to

this style of qualitative data collection are that the interviewer has more control over the types of information received and can ask follow-up questions immediately instead of relying on the subject to respond in full (Creswell, 2012). This is some of the richness of the data which allows the study to evolve as the data are collected. On the contrary, there are some disadvantages such as the responses are filtered through the interviewer and the response may not be what the subject intended. In this instance to counter the disadvantages, I used a member check to allow the subject to read the transcript and approve of the response recorded and the analysis, thus negating this disadvantage to a large degree (see Merriam, 2009).

The interview guides were self-developed in part to the lack of available pre-established instruments pertaining to the course placement practices as they relate to the COMPASS test; most of the interview guides found in an online search were Likert-style in design and did not provide a narrative for researchers to use in a qualitative methodological study. Additionally, because there is little evidence of cohesive practices regarding placement exams developing a new interview guide was deemed the best course of action. ACC is a specific setting which according to Lodico et al. (2010) is a common practice among experienced researchers. My questions for the students probed their experiences after being placed in either developmental or college-level courses. The faculty interview guide also explored their experiences with students who were placed into their courses as a result of a COMPASS content area score. The administrator interview guide was used while presenting the data that was collected and

gaining feedback as to the results of the study. Copies of the student interview guides were placed in Appendix A, the faculty interview guides in Appendix B, and the administrator interview guides in Appendix C.

Trustworthiness of the instrument can be determined by a panel of experts as suggested in Merriam (2009). In this study, I consulted a group of experts from a local university to review the instrument and determine whether it has clarity and could be used to conduct the interviews. In addition to the aforementioned review, reliability was established by conducting a pilot test with a small group of freshmen and sophomores and those faculty and administrators to evaluate whether the questions had: clarity of language and terms, answer the research questions, basic spelling and grammar, depth and breadth of sub-questions and items, and overall psychometric properties of the instrument (Lodico et al., 2010).

I reviewed the interview responses between the students, the college administrators and faculty to analyze the findings and determine whether a relationship existed between those who were placed in courses and persisted after taking the ACT or COMPASS exams. Furthermore, prior to concluding the interviews, I met again with the stakeholders and shared the analyzed data to ensure accurate interpretation. Meeting with stakeholders was done by setting a future meeting criterion by asking students, faculty, and administrators how they would prefer to review the transcripts and provide feedback. Merriam (2009) called this “member checking” and equated this to “the single most important way of ruling out

the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on” the data interpretation (p. 217). Also, using the three groups of cohort areas of data collection, the archival data, four student groups, and stakeholders ensured a higher degree of triangulation (Merriam, 2009). ACC remained committed to providing me access to the students and stakeholders as long as correct research protocols were utilized.

Role of the Researcher

I have had previous contact with many of the stakeholders at ACC, but I am not employed by the institution. I did volunteer at the remediation lab for a semester in order to gain some insight into the challenges some students experience during their early years at the college. However, this should not insert any bias into the study, as those students were not within the two cohorts examined during the qualitative phase of the study. The experience gained was important in order to gain a deeper richer understanding of some of the struggles students contend with in their daily experiences in school.

My interest in this area was developed over time due to my growing interest in student persistence. I began to read more information regarding the problems higher education was experiencing with student retention. This led me to more questions regarding why students who were accepted into higher education, and wanted to attend, why would they leave the institution prior to completing their degrees. My interests included those areas associated with remediation and the problems some

students were having just passing a remediation class. So, I began to question whether institutions were placing students based on the correct data. These placement practices led me to question the reliability of using the COMPASS exam as a precursor to student success.

Data Analysis

The archival data provided by ACC indicated whether those students who took the COMPASS entrance exam passed or failed their courses. Because not all students who enroll in ACC take the COMPASS, the data indicators only pointed to those students who took the COMPASS exam. The IR released the data to me indicating how many students took the COMPASS exam and persisted into college-level courses and passed those courses with a “C” or better. Coding this portion of the research study was relatively simple as a graph was drawn with a baseline representing a passing grade of “C”. Dots were placed either above or below the baseline to show those students who took the COMPASS and how they fared in their courses. Through an inductive process called preliminary exploratory analysis, I separated the interview results down into sections or segments and through this process determine appropriate labels for the information learned (Creswell, 2012). Lodico et al. (2010) furthered supported this analysis method by stating “to validate components in constant comparison may come from the same source” (p. 272). After which these sections were separated further into a few themes. Creswell (2012) stated the importance of writing a qualitative report using few themes in order to garner more detail. Merriam

(2009) concurred stating, “the fewer the categories (*themes*), the greater level of abstraction” (p. 187). Lodico et al. (2010) further guided my data analysis saying it is better to form fewer themes so the data is more coherent.

I developed codes after the data was collected. Because the emerging design is dependent on generating categories as the study progresses, I designed a figure to illustrate the data for those who require such to better inform the emerging narrative. This method of open ended coding is vital to the basic qualitative design as categories are established as the study progresses. The data from the students, faculty, and administrators are included in the aforementioned figure (see *figure 2*).

Evidence of Quality

The interview guides’ validity and reliability were pilot tested using a small selection of participants. Reliability was established after five students have been selected and the interview guide is administered twice with a two-week window in between tests. The pilot test was utilized because, according to Lodico et al. (2010), reliability is assured if the responses to the questions are the same for the two separate tests. A second test was simultaneously utilized called the content validity test. The content validity test is used to determine if the interview guide is valid or measuring what it is intended to measure (Lodico et al., 2010). Here the participants read the questions by the researcher and compare the questions to the research questions and determine if said questions will provide an answer. Because the participants in this study included students, faculty, and administrators, the pilot test employed a few

individuals from each of these groups. If pilot testers determine there is an issue with a question on the interview guide which is misleading or does not pertain to the projected study then they can suggest a rewording or removal of said question (Lodico et al., 2010). With regard to expertise, the pilot test included more faculty and administrators due to the level of expertise those individuals will poses verses the student testers. Using local experts as pilot members was done in addition to the committee review done by a local university.

Once the interview guides reliability and validity were established through the pilot test, I continued on with the study to collect interviews from my selected populations of students, faculty, and administrators. To further test the validity of the interview guide and the researcher's data recording process, a member check was utilized to verify each of the respondent's answers have been recorded accurately and to check with each participant to ensure their willingness to continue forward with the study (Merriam, 2009). All these levels of verification lowered the possibility of errors and improve triangulation of the results.

Conclusion

The methodology which guides this study is an important choice for any researcher to make. I selected the basic qualitative emergent design due to its ability to evolve as the study progresses. This research design is again supported by both Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2012). As the study progressed forward, the data were compared as

it was collected that guided the direction the research moves. Using this design also provided some protection against bias as each step of the analysis was driven by the data.

The number of participants used, although low, should be adequate for this study being the college's student population is small comparatively speaking (Creswell, 2012). Initially, I proposed for 7 students to be interviewed multiplied times four groups that is 28 students which is around 1% of the population. Again, Creswell (2012) stipulated that a small homogenous sample is quite sufficient to conduct a qualitative investigation as it limits the depth of the data. The faculty participants were going to be chosen from the remediation department and those college-level courses which most freshmen take on their first attempt. The faculty participant pool was selected by their respective department heads and then each faculty member was asked to voluntarily join the study. I impressed upon each faculty member that their choice is theirs and in no way, will a negative response have any retribution. The administrators have already volunteered to participate and were very interested in the findings of the study.

Collecting the data throughout the course of this study, I was governed by the study itself. In other words, as data are formulated from the text of the interviews, it helped guide the direction the researcher went from step to step. The interview guides were self-developed due to the lack of an adequate resource elsewhere which proved to benefit the study because few of these types of research projects have been conducted in this state and the interview guides were designed with the area in mind. After the interviews were conducted and transcribed the data as a whole was analyzed and coded

appropriately. Hence, I developed a rich narrative extracted from the results of my interviews offering readers coherent answers to the research questions.

Data Analysis Results

I utilized a thematic approach to analyzing the data collected from the student, faculty, and administration interviews. The archival data that was obtained before the interviews were supplied by the institution and was already coded into themes identifying who had passed either their remediation or college-level courses they were placed in. Analyzing this data was conducted by reading through each student's line and painstakingly determining whether each student who took the COMPASS exam failed the course where they were placed and failed to persist into college-level courses or passed the college-level course they were placed. Each code, pass or fail, was counted and assembled into a table located in my code book (Creswell, 2012).

The interview guides were formulated from the research questions and were validated utilizing a pilot test. Three students were interviewed using the newly formed interview guides, and their responses confirmed the validity of the guides. Additionally, a content validity test was utilized and was found to be reliable by the students, faculty, and administrators who participated in the pilot test. In passing the pilot study, the interview guides were utilized for both the faculty, administrators, and students. Upon gaining approval from the URB, I contacted the Vice-Chancellor at ACC and after consulting with the Chancellor approval to move forward with the study was granted. The Vice-

Chancellor appointed one of the directors as a representative from the college, and it is through her that I was to contact the students and faculty of the college.

While conducting the interviews, I began my analysis immediately by noting possible segments which could be later broken down into smaller codes. According to Merriam (2009), “Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating. Simultaneous data collection and analysis occur both in and out of the field” (p. 170). After finishing the interviews, I could have paid someone to transcribe the interviews lessening my workload, but I chose to do the transcribing myself to further allow me access to the richness of the data. Transcribing my own interviews is also strongly recommended by Merriam (2009) as this allows the researcher to develop insights and intuition regarding the direction the data is going. As is recommended by Creswell (2012), I read through all of the transcriptions carefully and recorded ideas for codes while dividing each of the individual interviews into segments. Coding and segmenting required repeated reading and thoroughly going through each interview line by line to identify possible codes. I then coded each interview separately with the Microsoft Word database using the comment function to note each of the codes in the side margin using one, two or three words as labels. *Figure 1* illustrates this nicely showing the several steps Creswell (2012) recommends in the coding of qualitative data. After each interview was coded, I went back through each of the coded interviews and recorded each code into a codebook to allow me to identify any redundancy and reduce the overlap by gathering similar codes together under one code. Utilizing this type of

inductive process allowed me to narrow the data even further into a few themes. The use of a codebook is a technique suggested by Creswell (2012) aiding in the assignment of scores to each of the responses in the instruments which in this case were the interview guides.

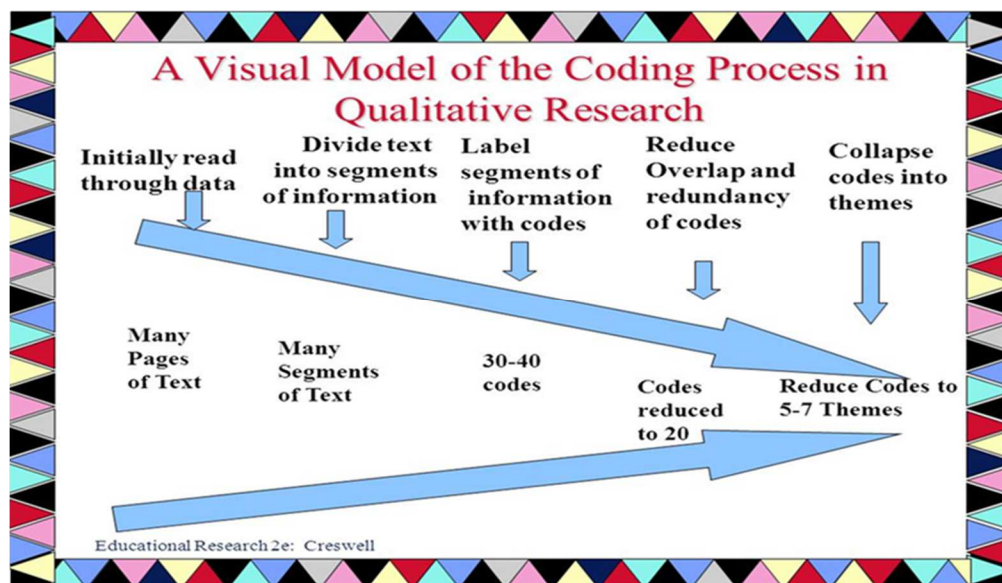


Figure 1. A visual model of the coding process in qualitative research

Source: (Creswell, 2012; p. 244)

I then scrupulously examined each of the codes which remained and organized them into categories or themes by comparing each code back to the research questions. The process of axial or analytical coding is identified by Merriam (2009) as the process that Richards (2006) identified as “coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning” (p. 180). The codes were written down into the codebook and categorized

into the themes, the fewer of which will enable me to communicate my findings to the readers in much more understandable context (Merriam, 2009).

Validity

Validity and reliability of any research project require a set of procedures to ensure accuracy or credibility of the findings. To assure the validity of the findings I utilized triangulation and member checking. Triangulation of the data was practiced because the source of the data came from four different sources; archival data, students, faculty, and administrators. Member checking is defined as a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (see Creswell, 2012). After concluding the interviews, I was able to contact three of the students, all of the faculty and administrators who determined the transcriptions were accurate. Furthermore, I discussed with the students, faculty, and administrators if they believed the themes which I had developed were accurate and my interpretations were meticulous.

Discrepant Cases

Using open-ended questions in the interview guides invites some salient data to be generated. To overcome any conspicuous or discrepant data, I rigorously searched for data which could support alternative explanations. Merriam (2009) explained that failure to find any evidence of presenting the data in alternative ways or “contrary explanations helps increase confidence in the original, principal explanation” (p. 219). I did not

identify any discrepant data; however, the data is presented exactly as the participants provided their responses and this will allow for others to come to their interpretations.

Findings

Archival Data Analysis

In my analysis of the archival data, I did find sufficient cause to warrant further investigation. In *Figure 1*, I noted a total of 702 students took the COMPASS test from 2013 thru 2015. Out of the 1002 students, 533 failed the courses they were placed in, and 378 students passed those courses. Of those students who passed the remediation courses, only 91 persisted into their next semester, and 226 students who were placed in college-level classes endured into their next semester. The archival data did confirm those

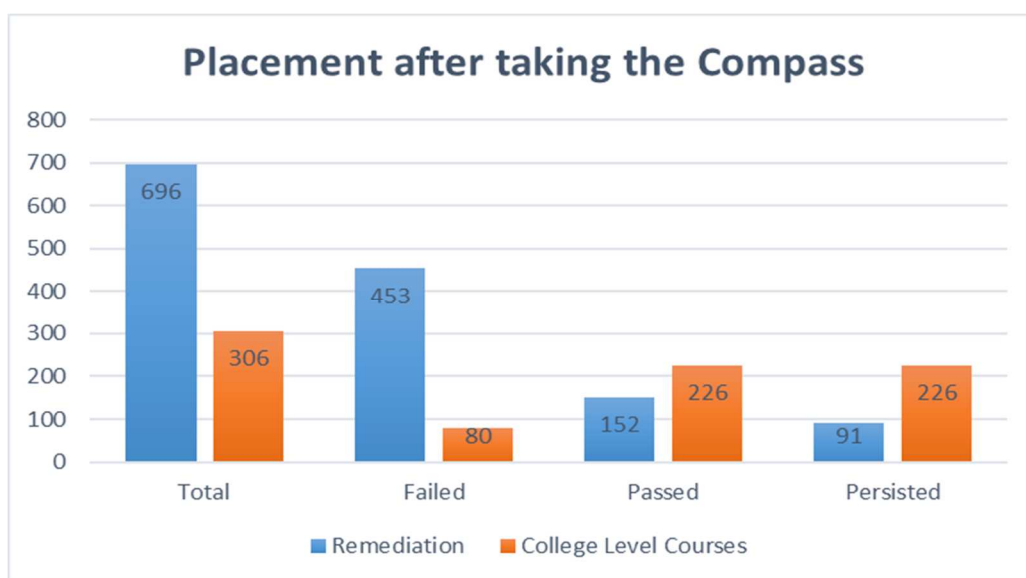


Figure 2: Archival Data, total students, placed using the COMPASS exam 2013-2015.

suspensions indicating there was a retention issue, but that data did not indicate whether placement practices using the COMPASS entrance exam added to the problem which

required the need for interviewing students and faculty to determine if, in fact, using the COMPASS test did have a part in the creation of the problem.

Student Data Gathered and Recorded

The students were the first target group, and the director sent out the student contact emails to forty students. We waited approximately four weeks for any replies, but no students returned any of the emails. The director then sent another round of emails to garner interest in the study, but she did not receive one email returned.

Because the contact emails failed to provide any participants, I was granted permission to sit in the student union and interview volunteers there. I stayed in the student union for 8 hours, and I successfully interviewed ten students who consented for participation in the study. I placed myself sitting at a corner table far enough from any activity to reduce distractions and allow the student to feel comfortable with providing honest responses. The ambient noise was low and was acceptable to the researcher and the participants. During the interviews, each student was provided a copy of the interview guide which outlined the nature of the study and informed them of their rights, as participants, and to gain consent for the use of the data they provided. Each of the interviews was recorded on a digital recorder and then after transcribing were transferred to a flash drive for later storage.

Table 1

Student Participant Interview Times

Student Participants	Interview Times
Student S1	9:00 to 9:18
Student S2	9:22 to 9:35
Student S3	9:40 to 9:50
Student S4	10:05 to 10:25
Student S5	10:30 to 10:44
Student S6	11:00 to 11:33
Student S7	11:35 to 11:57
Student S8	12:04 to 12:11
Student S9	12:30 to 12:46
Student S10	12:55 to 1:16

Fortune did step my way, for out of the ten students interviewed, 5 were freshmen, and 5 were sophomores. Having five of each allowed me to get an even spread of students who had just started their journey through college, and those students who had experienced more than one year of school. Having an even number of students also provided me with an even spread of traditional and non-traditional students as there were five of each. Only three of the students in the group had admitted they received a modified curriculum in high school. Additionally, having an even distribution of

interviewees allowed me to collect data from a good representation demographically of the student body.

Of the total students interviewed, four were placed directly into college-level courses, and six were placed into remedial courses, because of the COMPASS exam and other placement data considered. There were eight who considered themselves successful with the placement as they continued to achieve success in the courses after the initial placement, and two who were unsuccessful. When I asked them if they believed the COMPASS exam placed them appropriately academically, five felt the test was adequate and correctly determined their academic level, and the other five believed the test placed them a little low in math. Student A7 confirmed, “The scores were reflective, no very well reflective of my academic abilities.” After inquiring of the five why they believed it placed them low in mathematics, they responded by explaining they found the remediation courses easy and passed them with little or no trouble. A8 mentioned in his/her interview “If I was as low as my scores showed then the math and writing remediation classes would have been a little harder.” Student A5 of the students further mentioned that he/she believed academic preparedness and test stress contributed to their low scores in math on the COMPASS test, “I’m just not good at taking tests generally....if I had a refresher or a study guide, I would have done a lot better”. When I pressed A4 asking, “Do you believe you have experienced success?”, He replied, “Ok, I took it and passed all the sections except one, and when I took the class I passed it perfect. It seemed like it passed me a little too low on just that one section, math.” The

test scores and the ease of the remediation courses confirms what 5 of the students reported which if they had been informed more clearly of the need for them to self-remediate before taking the entrance exam, it might have better reflected their academic abilities.

In addition to the academic preparedness, some students reported they often have difficulty balancing school, work, and family. Four of the students did mention that many of their colleagues had experienced issues related to family and work-related pressures resulting in their inability to continue in their courses. A10 mentioned the college “could offer more courses in the evenings” easing pressures due to family and work schedules which often conflict with college coursework. The offering of more evening courses would enable more students to have much more flexibility regarding their course schedules. Once the interviews were completed and the sessions transcribed I brought each transcription up as a Word document and synthesize each answer to determine themes and patterns. Organizing the data into codes as they pertained to each research question and then developing patterns which were later categorized under a prospective theme.

Faculty Data Gathered and Recorded

The faculty interviews were scheduled by the Director of Academic Initiatives and the same procedure was utilized. The Director of Academic Initiatives chose six faculty members who taught either remedial or college-level courses. Table 2 outlines the interview schedule.

Table 2

Faculty Interview Schedule

Faculty Participants	Interview Times
Faculty #1 F1	8:30am till 9:05am
Faculty #2 F2	9:15am till 9:25am
Faculty #3 F3	9:25am till 9:45am
Faculty #4 F4	11:00am till 11:33am
Faculty #5 F5	12:05pm till 12:30pm
Faculty #6 F6	12:30pm till 12:55pm

Of the total faculty members, five were considered veterans as they had more than ten years of experience, and one was considered new because she had only one year of experience. Four of the faculty members taught remediation classes and two taught collegial level courses. The interviews took place in a side office of a computer lab located on campus. The location of the office provided a comfortable area with extremely low ambient noise with which to conduct the interviews.

The five veterans believed the biggest challenge students faced was their work-ethic. Faculty member F3 stated, “I would say generally, when students fail it is due to not attending class, not turning in assignments.” This statement is reflective of the comments most of the faculty members made regarding problems students face in their classroom. Three of the codes motivation, missing assignments, and attendance fell under

the theme of work-ethic. During the interview of F2, I asked what he felt was the biggest challenge facing first-year students and he replied, “first-year students realizing they have to do the work, they have to do the work. This is not a slap on public education, generally speaking, you’ll get passed along if you do a significant amount of work but if you want the certificate or the degree you have to do the work. You really have to do the work. That’s the first challenge they faced”. Faculty member F4 further confirmed the work-ethic conundrum by saying, “So I think that they expect an academic bail out when they get here. When they don’t get that from everyone they tend to maybe rely on the second problem which is a sense of entitlement, oh, no, I deserve this you know.” According to Zabel, Biermeier-Hanson, Baltes, Early & Shepard, (2017), work ethic “refers to the extent to which one believes that working hard will yield desirable outcomes” (p. 301). Using this definition, I deduced the faculty members meant some students lacked the ability to work hard and thus, failing their courses.

One faculty member also cited family issues constituted some of the difficulties some students face while attending college. Many of the students who attend ACC come to school with jobs and families to tend to outside of school, and this often creates some conflict. Faculty member F2 mentions quite authoritatively, “some students have full-time jobs and families, and that hurts them. They don’t get their work done.” The social conflict was confirmed by other faculty members like F3 who commented that in the past her social life often conflicted with school eventually causing her to drop college for a year. F4 furthered this issue by sharing what one student came into his office saying, “A

friends' advisee this morning talked about I'm going to drop out. She found out her husband molested her younger daughter, and also found out her older daughter was pregnant." Balancing the needs of the family, jobs, and school can be quite a challenge for many students, and when they have not taken those issues into consideration, they often end up dropping out of college.

Overall, the faculty members interviewed did not believe the COMPASS exam was the primary reason students did not persist in college. The consensus was the COMPASS was a fair assessment, although not perfect, did provide the college with a fair assessment of academic ability. Faculty member F6 stated it very concisely when asked if the COMPASS was a good predictor of success, "Pretty much, yes." One faculty member even compared the COMPASS to the Accuplacer by saying, "I think the COMPASS test is a better indicator than the Accuplacer." His class was used as a pilot class during the change over from the COMPASS to the Accuplacer and saw firsthand how the Accuplacer scored the students lower in many areas. As I re-examined the archival data, this issue could very well fit into the data collected and indicate the real problem is some students do not have the work ethic to persist in a college environment.

One final area the faculty noted as problematic was student test stress. Often, when students begin taking a test, they will focus and try on the first half, but then begin just to check random answers just to get through the test. Also, students begin the test in a stress mode which hampers their ability to calmly solve problems or answer questions, and they often do poorly as a result. One faculty member put it plainly, "Because I have a

lot of students don't want to spend the time to do it and, they're tired about half way through they just start marking or clicking on answers, and ... that used to be the last part and so then that determines what class they are in. And so, sometimes they get in the wrong class. Because they just blew it off. I should say, sometimes it is adequate if the student tried on the test." When I asked F5 whether she felt the COMPASS was an adequate indicator for academic preparedness she believed test stress played a major part, "they've been out of school for 5 or 6 years, and they didn't do well on the test because it's the first test they've taken in 5 years or so" Most of the other faculty members concurred with this assessment and believed the students did not take the test seriously.

Administrator Data and Gathered

The two administrators who participated in the interviews were both considered veterans as they had over ten years of experience in the field of higher education. The interviews were conducted in offices where ambient noises were at a minimum and were done at separate times as is noted in Table 3. Both agreed to the terms to participate and that the sessions would be recorded.

I questioned them on their perceptions of the COMPASS test, and both believed the entrance exam was adequate as a placement test if other data were also considered, although both admitted there were limitations to the test especially in math.

Administrator B2 shared her beliefs as follows, "it's not the best, I don't think there is any placement test that is the best. Because it's a once in a time period and we all know that's not the best indicator of a person's level of learning or what they've learned, so, not

the best, I think it was the best we could do at the time. Until something comes better it is about all we can do is take that.” Her assessment confirms the beliefs that not just the COMPASS exam, but all entrance exams have their limitations and should be holistically considered with a student’s entire battery of data.

Table 3:

Administrator Interview Schedule

Administrator Participants	Times
Administrator A1	8:30am to 9:08am
Administrator A2	9:30am to 10:22am

With regards to the concerns the students had with the low placement in math, one of the administrators was aware of this discrepancy, but together they continued to believe the test was the best tool they had at the time and did not believe the COMPASS test contributed greatly to the persistence problem at the institution. “In regards to the COMPASS test, in regard to math especially, we have found that a lot of students come in even if we’re using a different assessment, place lower in math. I think that is across the board.” The comment referring to the COMPASS placing students lower in math, was a reflection of over 30 years in the field of higher education where she has been privy to the use of multiple placement tests.

I then asked them to describe what they believed were some of the obstacles which produced the retention rate. The administrators replied that as the college is considered a commuter campus because there are no dorms onsite, and that many of the

students had lives outside of their college experience, most of the issues students struggled with were working 40 hour a week jobs and coping with family situations. B1 mentioned, “But they also have a family, they have children to support, and many of them have jobs working 40 hours a week thinking they need to take 15 hours of classes, so we see that as a major issue.” The conflict between personal life and college life is consistent with some of the students who also mentioned outside obligations as a struggle with persisting in college.

The other factor which the administrators mentioned was the work-ethic problem being an extremely prevalent issue. B1 cited the work-ethic problem as part of the overall problem of persistence, “They have to treat college as if it is a work. As if it is a job, and many times they don’t. They see it as an extra thing. They don’t see it as a main thing to do. So a lot of our students we see that at a two-year college.” B1 further clarified her position by explaining many students when faced with problems in their lives will let the work at college go until life in general improves for them. B2 furthered the argument stating, “Homework is a huge issue. It’s like they think, I don’t have to do that, but if you’re going to learn something you have to practice and that’s what homework is all about, and they just don’t want to do that.” Additionally, B2 put part of the blame on the secondary education culture of students being able to make-up assignments and participate in credit recovery programs which allows them to practice a poor work ethic while at the same time having the ability to regain credit for assignments not completed, When I pressed her on this particular issue by asking about the homework conundrum B2

asked, “Can I be real honest?” I replied, “Yes, most certainly.” She continued, “I think it’s because they don’t have to do it in high school. They don’t have to, they think that if they miss an assignment, at the end of the semester you’re going to take anyway. No, we don’t do that in college. So, that’s one of the issues students right out of high school and I’m not saying high schools are bad, I’m just saying it’s an issue that it’s a transition from high school to college from the teacher being responsible for your learning to you having to be responsible for your learning.” Considering my many years in the high school environment, I found it to be quite true. Many times, in my observations, students while attending high school find themselves falling short in their semester grade and will often ask for a plan for recovery. When the students ask for assistance it often culminates with a meeting with the parent, student, teacher, and administrator to formulate a plan. This, of course, is not available at the college-level and students are often shocked at this discovery.

The last issue the administrators mentioned was student test anxiety with regard to COMPASS reliability. Both administrators brought up the issue and stated that once a student has been identified with this problem, they are referred to the counseling office where they can be assessed and then develop a solution. “Testing is one of those areas. And to help with that, we now have counseling services doing a lot of test anxiety workshops, and we have... This semester they have already announced they’re going to do, because of the response have come to; they’re going to add more this semester.” The

administration is aware of test anxiety and are doing what they can to assist students in overcoming the matter.

Patterns, Relationships, and Themes

The emergent design of the basic qualitative method stresses the need for associating categories and emerging conclusions instead of fitting the data into some coding diagram or picture (Creswell, 2012). This type of data analysis allows the researcher more flexibility as data is assimilated. For this reason, I analyzed the data seeking an explanation for the overall situation at ACC resulting in a 48% student persistence rate. Was the COMPASS exam responsible for some of the issues related to the low retention of students at ACC?

Theme 1 COMPASS Reliability

The ten students who were interviewed were separated into two groups of five, first-year and second-year students. When asked about the validity of the COMPASS exam, the first-year students believed the COMPASS scored them adequately but noted that test anxiety had affected them which could have impacted their score. The second-year students overall believed the COMPASS placed them a little lower in math but felt they needed the lower stress level to get acclimated to the college experience. Two of the second-year students noted they experienced some rough spots in the remedial math course, but passed the course with above average scores, but were not planning on persisting. Overall, the student responses were positive regarding the validity of the COMPASS test and believed they were placed according to their academic ability. The

student's beliefs are contrary to the cited studies already documented in the literature review contained in Part 1 of this study.

When the faculty members were questioned about the COMPASS reliability, all six believed the COMPASS exam was close enough on its academic assessment not to warrant any concern. The instructors noted those students who were considered traditional, hence, just removed from high school, seemed to have the most difficulty in class, and this was in part due to an attitude of entitlement. Those that did not pass their courses either did not attend enough to show mastery of the material through course tests or did not turn in assignments daily. These students had shown they could understand the material through instruction and each one had the necessary academic preparedness to have success.

Theme 2: Work Ethic

The work ethic theme was developed from the codes found in the interviews which involved attendance, completing assignments, and an attitude of entitlement. The student interviewees did not mention this in their interviews, but the faculty were all in agreement that many students do not have the work ethic necessary to find consistent success in college. Regarding those students who failed their courses, all six of the faculty members felt that attendance and completing assignments was the most common factor which contributed to the students not passing their courses. Three of the faculty felt the traditional students carried this sense of entitlement with them from high school. When I asked about the sense of entitlement, the instructors stated the students would

come to them after missing a lot of assignments and ask for some sort of solution to their problem. The administrators concurred in this assessment and agreed that this issue contributes greatly to the inability of students to find success in the collegial level courses, but also noted family obligations were also a factor.

Theme 3: Family Obligations

The family obligations theme showed itself more in the faculty and administrators interviews than it did in the student interviews. The difference is understandable as the students may not have wanted to discuss their lives on a personal level with me but was more apt to do so with their advisors who are faculty and with the administrators. Upon repeatedly finding the COMPASS exam was considered an adequate placement test in the eyes of most of the interviewees, it was necessary to compound some answers as to the low retention rate. Because there are no dorms on campus, many of the students who graduate from high school attend those institutions that have dorms, so they can enjoy a college experience which suits their needs, which results in the community colleges getting students who live at home and have outside obligations such as family and maintaining adequate employment. According to the faculty and administrators, this is the primary reason students often do not persist in school.

Theme 4: Test Preparedness

All three of the cohorts had participants who described test preparedness as one of the issues relating to the scores achieved by students on their COMPASS entrance exam. There were three identifiable codes which contributed to me grouping them into this one

theme; test anxiety, academic preparedness, and test results analysis. Yazici (2017) defines test anxiety as “an emotional reaction or state of stress that occurs before exams and lasts during the exam period (p. 62). Many of the students interviewed were very adamant regarding the effects of test anxiety and their scores on the COMPASS exam and were not aware they could take the entrance exam additional times. The faculty and administration consented to the possibility that test anxiety contributed to lower scores and were not keenly aware of how the students felt about this issue until some of the results of this study were shared with them during the interviews. Regardless, the students felt this was an issue which needs to be addressed before taking a high stakes test.

Academic preparedness was a primary issue brought up by the faculty during their interviews. The faculty often cite issues of attendance and assignment completion as linked to academic preparedness where students get frustrated with the content and then fail to complete assignments and then resort to non-attendance. Attendance and assignment completion is not the only conundrum in math, but many have noted some students' inability to engage in formal writing. Some of the faculty blamed this squarely on the secondary schools for using the academic bailout for students who at the end of a grading period have not turned in assignments and are asking for extra credit or credit recovery.

The administrators interviewed noted the need for test analysis when it comes to a low score on a student's entrance exam. During the sessions, I would ask whether the

COMPASS was a good assessment, and they believed it was adequate, but if a student got a low score, then the placement office would need to conduct a test analysis to determine if the low score, matches the other data involved in the placement process. Through test analysis, the placement advisor could examine all the data and discuss with the student the need to possibly re-test or engage in some self-remediation to recall some of the information they learned while in secondary schools.

Outcomes

The research problem I examined is why ACC is experiencing a 48% retention rate, and whether the retention rate was caused in part by placement scores provided by the COMPASS exam. Although according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2017), this retention rate is consistent with the average community college across the nation, the numbers are still troublesome because the Arkansas Legislature has tied higher education funding to retention rate. The purpose of this study was to determine whether the COMPASS entrance examination bared any responsibility to this issue with regards to its academic assessment. Four themes were identified as a result of this study; Theme 1, COMPASS Reliability; Theme 2, Work Ethic; Theme 3, Family Obligations; Theme 4, Test Preparedness. This data may inform stakeholders at ACC who, in turn, could use it in their future reviews of placement policy.

Conclusion

Student persistence is an important statistic to community colleges across the country. In this qualitative study, I desired to understand if using the COMPASS exam

contributed to the low retention rates. Because retention rates are increasingly becoming a major funding criterion and are used by parents and students when researching prospective colleges, it is important to understand the contributing factors which lead to students leaving an institution without completing a degree or technical certificate.

Research Question 1: How effective is the COMPASS entrance exam in placing students into college-level courses to facilitate their future academic success?

This study addressed this research question and found consistent answers among the stakeholders. The faculty believed the COMPASS exam was an adequate test even after acknowledging that it may have placed some students lower in math. The students concurred with this response as they too believed the COMPASS exam was acceptable even though it placed some of them low in the area of math. The administrators also stated their confidence in the test but added that test analysis needs to be conducted whether either the student or the placement specialist believes the scores to be lower than they should be.

Research Question 2: Students: What do you believe should be the components placement specialists should examine while determining a placement recommendation?

This question was solely put forth to the students, so they could have some input in the criteria involved in initially placing students in courses. The students believed it was important to include high school GPA, study habits, and available family support into the placement decision. Using the aforementioned data, they believed, would provide a holistic view of the student's capabilities and identify any possible shortcomings.

Additionally, its consistent with other findings claiming it is paramount for placement specialists to consider other data besides the just the placement test results (Saxon & Morante, 2014). Saxon & Morante (2014) further concur that placement specialists should use high school GPA as a part of the data analysis regarding academic placement along with the assessment results.

Research Question 3: Students/Faculty: What other issues explain why some students fail to finish their coursework?

The faculty and some of the students concurred stating there were other issues which contributed to students failing their courses and not persisting. According to the faculty, work-ethic was the largest factor which includes attendance, homework completion, and study habits. Family related issues were also noted by both cohorts as many of the non-traditional students had husbands, wives, and children requiring necessary attention which took time away from educational needs.

Research Question 4: Administrators/Faculty: What are the faculty and staff impressions of the course placement practices at ACC? And what would they recommend improving placement practices? What benefits or negative impacts did you perceive from using the COMPASS Exam?

The faculty at ACC believed the placement practices at ACC were acceptable and complemented the Saxon and Morante (2014) study by stating it was important that a holistic view of the student's abilities were considered. One faculty member suggested it may be a good idea to include a writing examination separate from the placement test

which would allow an instructor in the English department to grade and then provide a recommendation. The administrators who participated in the interview process believed it might be necessary to conduct a test analysis when the scores appear a little low. The administrators also believe low scores are often common with non-traditional students who have been away from the classroom for more than five years, but that traditional students deserve a closer look. The only negative issue regarding the COMPASS test discussed were the low scores associated with math portion.

Summary

The overall outcome of this study is to provide the college with additional information and feedback from faculty and students regarding the use of the COMPASS exam, other assessment tools, and placement strategies. After evaluating the data collected; the students, faculty, and administrators did not believe the COMPASS exam contributed in any great deal to the student attrition problem being experienced by ACC. Additionally, the research will also provide ACC with the latest information regarding placement strategies and provide that to the stakeholders, so they can determine whether any of the findings will address their specific needs regarding placement of students in courses. The placement strategies chosen will have to be not only research based, but evidence based so the stakeholders can be assured the strategies have worked in similar institutions. Furthermore, those strategies will also have to be cost effective and be relatively simple to initiate. Section three will integrate the findings with the current research and provide this information to the institution.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine whether placement practices using the COMPASS placement exam contributed to student attrition or lack of progress in college-level courses at ACC during their first year. Contrary to the hypothesis suggested at the onset of this study, that placement in remedial courses would negatively affect retention, I found other issues which negatively affected first-year student attrition. The results of the interviews and the data analysis indicated the stakeholders did not believe the use of the COMPASS exam for placement held much, if any, responsibility for the first-year student attrition issue. The discourse the faculty, students, and administrators engaged in during the interview phase of this study allowed them to voice their experiences first hand. The secondary purpose of this study made it necessary to formulate a policy recommendation to share the findings and to inform the stakeholders of possible suggestions to improve the student retention rate. The objectives of these recommendations would be to provide the stakeholders with program suggestions to reach out to future students to inform them of the needed set of skills to find success in college, and to provide a support system for entering freshmen identified as at-risk for leaving the college before their degree plan is complete.

In this section, I provide a background of the existing problem along with a summary of the findings from this study. Next, I present a scholarly rationale of why I chose the project genre which will incorporate some of the data analysis and how first-

year student attrition is addressed in the project. I also provide an extensive scholarly literature review supporting the recommendations to counter some of the problem issues identified in the study. I then outline those recommendations and connect those to the evidence provided both in the study and the literature review. It is the goal of this project to present the college with corroboration from three successful attrition programs to allow the administration to consider the option of employing some of the program recommendations to provide a partial solution to the loss of students during the first year affecting the college. The three programs were chosen due to their high success rates and their relatively low cost of implementation.

Description and Goals

I initiated this study to determine whether using the use of the COMPASS entrance exam for placement of students contributed to the student attrition problem at ACC. My overreaching goal here is to learn ways to improve first-year student retention. During the data analysis phase of the study, I found four emerging themes: COMPASS reliability, work ethic, family obligations, and test preparedness. At the inception of this study, many studies indicated placement testing was not effective in helping place students in college level courses for students leaving the institution before completing their degrees. There is a growing amount of literature indicating the fallibility of the COMPASS exam to adequately place students in the courses they needed. As with many qualitative studies, the data drove this study and found other areas which, according to most of the stakeholders, held a higher degree of responsibility for student attrition.

Therefore, this study addressed the data concerning the COMPASS exam, but it also examined the data put forth by the participants that are indicated by the latter three of the themes work ethic, family obligations, and test preparedness.

For this study to have an impact on social change, the stakeholders need to be made aware of programs they can participate in to provide a working solution to help students continue in college. The primary goals will be to provide three research and practice-based programs which have shown promise in other colleges across the country. It is important to me, as an educator, to not only have outlined the local problem, but to provide real solutions which could have a positive social impact for the institution. I hope to provide sufficient information to provide a basis for some program recommendations to improve retention of the students at ACC.

Rationale

I chose the genre for this study after the data analysis was conducted to determine what was needed to provide a decrease to the first-year student attrition at ACC. Because I found, during the data analysis, that using the COMPASS exam for placement of students was not the primary reason students do not complete their degree plans, program recommendations must be introduced here to provide the institution with viable solutions. The administration and faculty have painstakingly sought a solution to this problem by instituting new programs and invigorating old ones which could show promise for improving retention. Their frustration level is high although masked by their undaunted desire to provide a culture of positivity on the campus. Nevertheless, it is still an issue

which has plagued this community college as well as a vast majority of other similar institutions across the globe.

Because this study found the stakeholders believed the COMPASS exam was not responsible for the below average student retention rate, I felt it was prudent to base the project around those factors cited by the students, faculty, and administrators. In doing so, I focused a second review of the literature on programs found to have a positive influence on the attrition of first-year students with regards to work ethic, family pressures, and academic preparedness.

Review of the Literature

Institutions of higher education continue to challenge themselves to meet the needs of its current students and the local economy. The pressure the administration and faculty of community colleges face on a daily basis to thwart the loss of students during the first two years is tremendous for it can turn future students away and create a loss of revenue because state funding depends on student retention. The purpose of this literature review is to link possible solutions to Tinto's constructs about academic integration and first-year student retention in community college environments (Davidson & Petrosko, 2015; Davidson & Wilson, 2017; Howard & Flora, 2015; Tinto, 2017; Tinto, 2012). It is vital for students to be successful they must become invested in the institution and for the college to invest in the success of the students. Student investment is the cornerstone of Tinto's theory on retention. While conducting this literature review, I searched a variety of educational databases such as ERIC, EBSCO Host, Education Research Complete, and

Sage Premier all within the Walden Library. Searches were also conducted in Google Scholar and Bing. The search words and phrases were Student Attrition, Student Retention, Summer Bridge Programs, Peer Mentoring, Learner-Centered Classrooms, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in education, Community College Attrition, Accelerated Learning Program, Programs for Retention, and Placement Criteria.

Tinto's Student Persistence Model

The most popular and modeled persistence theory is the one put forth by Tinto (1975) outlining the need for students to assimilate into the college culture. In 2012, Tinto modified his theory by including the institution as holding part of the responsibility for providing an environment conducive to student integration which included providing programs and support to new students as they begin their academic trek. An intrinsic part of the Tinto Model is the three dimensions of student motivation (Tinto, 2017).

The first of the three is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the belief in one's capabilities to accomplish a task. "Students with positive self-efficacy are willing to put more effort into and be more persistent on the academic tasks they choose (Wang, Harrison, & Cardullo, 2018). Students with a high sense of self-efficacy will challenge themselves to overcome difficulties opposed to those with low self-efficacy often become discouraged and withdraw (Tinto, 2017). Tinto (2017) continued his conceptual analysis by stating that self-efficacy is not fixed, and can be altered or "influenced" by the experiences he or she encounters (p. 3). Therefore, if institutions provide positive

supports, then it matters little what level of self-efficacy a student enters the college with but may be further defined by the experiences within the institutional culture.

The second dimension is the students' sense of belonging. It is necessary for persistence to occur students need to become "engaged and come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional staff" (Tinto, 2017 p. 4). In secondary education, teachers learn it is important to form a positive relationship with their students, so those students feel connected. The same is true for higher education instructors' need to connect with their students, so those students have a feeling of belonging. Students need to know there is someone they can come and see without being judged and seek advice or share their difficulties. The relationships with their student peers can also bring a huge impact on the students' sense of belonging. Being with other students who have a common interest and can provide support to each other. Acquiring a sense of belonging can provide an anchor to the institution which will lead to persistence.

The third and final dimension is the curriculum. There is a plethora of literature about the learning paradigm and how it is vastly better than the old instructional paradigm of the past. The learner paradigm places the student as the focus of the information instead of the instructor (Tagg, 2003). In other words, the instructor is the guide which provides direction for students to learn which gives the classroom and its participants a chance to utilize methods such as project-based learning which can provide the student with reasons why the information is relevant and necessary. Using Tinto's

model, there are three models many community colleges are using and are having some success: Accelerated Learning Programs, Summer Bridge Programs, and peer mentoring.

Accelerated Learning Programs

Remediation in higher education has been under increased scrutiny over the past few decades due to spiraling costs, student dissatisfaction, and student attrition. It is no secret students at community colleges tend to have lower grade point averages, be first-generation college students, work more hours, and were awarded lesser amounts of financial aid than their counterparts at 4-year institutions (Davidson & Wilson, 2017). These statistics alone provided community colleges with a challenge to live up to their larger counterparts, the 4-year university with regards to retention. It is then that we visit the remediation issue and see many of the problems associated with it. Studies examining the effectiveness of remediation have had mixed results further clouding the literature seeking a clear view on its effectiveness (Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). Nevertheless, without a clear solution, community colleges across the globe have had to bear the brunt of the remediation conundrum in an attempt to prepare students for college-level courses. It is with this uncertainty that a community college in Baltimore attempted to change the paradigm by which remediation is taught.

Peter Adams, the coordinator of the writing program at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), was concerned the effective basic writing program would be an academic gate many would not be able to surpass and move on to college-level English classes (Adams, Gearhart, Miller, & Roberts, 2009). Adams conducted some

studies evaluating his program and after analyzing the data found the “gate” he described as one which was locked and hindering many students from persisting. Only about a third of the students who took the remedial writing class moved on to college-level courses.

Adams et al. (2009) described the pathway to success as a “pipeline which students must pass through to succeed, and the longer the pipeline, the more likely there will be leakage from it” (p. 53). In other words, students were dropping out of college because they could not pass through the gate. Over the next few years, Adams and his department continued to examine data and brainstorm ideas on how to improve their program so more students would succeed. Adams and his colleagues examined other mainstreaming approaches and borrowed the best from each and developed what they called the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP).

ALP is provided to students on a voluntary basis whose placement shows they some basic writing remediation (Adams et al., 2009; Morris, 2015). The Accuplacer exam determines the placement score. The student who volunteers for the course registers for the college-level English 101 course along with seven other remedial students. Included in the English 101 course are twelve other students who are stronger writers who can also serve as role models for the basic writers. The eight remedial students also enroll in a companion course of basic writing which is taught by the same instructor. Both the English 101 and the companion course meet for three credit hours each. The companion class meets immediately after the English 101 course, the instructor then provides support to those students by either working on the assigned work from English

101 or by answering questions from the students directly (Adams et al., 2009). After coming up with a model, they had to sell it to the administration who at first stated the college could not afford to fund the classes, especially the ones with only eight students. The faculty compromised and agreed to teach the companion course for two credits instead of the three. The faculty felt the companion course was more of a workshop and would not require much preparation. Adams reported the faculty after teaching the courses together, found the companion course one of the most rewarding experiences as the students responded positively and passed the course. ALP launched in 2007.

After two years, the English department faculty continued to study the rate of success by comparing the ALP results to those students who continued taking the traditional pipeline and found the ALP courses passed 63% of its students while the traditional course setup only passed 39% (Adams et al., 2009). After the publication of the results of the ALP, other researchers began to take notice of the success rates and were invited to examine the data themselves. The *Community College Research Center* conducted a research project analyzing the data and found the ALP program at CCBC indicated “positive correlations between participation in ALP and the likelihood of English 101 and English 102 completion.” Additionally, the study also found those students who participated in ALP were more likely to persist into the next year of college completing more college-level courses (Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, & Jaggars, 2012).

Other research groups continued to seek the data from CCBC on their success with ALP. A brief from Hanover Research (2014) found those students who enrolled in

an ALP were more likely to pass college-level English than their non-ALP participants and to persist into the following term and the following year. Further studies have found similar results which indicates why many other community colleges across the nation are using a similar model and are having similar results (Adams & McKusick, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014; Michigan Center for Student Success, 2016; Morris, 2015; Sides, 2016). The ALP program with all its success also works into Tinto's three dimensions of student motivation by providing a sense of self-efficacy through success in an academic area, giving students a sense of belonging, and a learner-centered classroom.

Summer Bridge Programs and First Year Seminars

A summer bridge program is a type of college transition intervention offered to students the summer before their freshman year. These programs reach out to students who are classified as at-risk and lack self-confidence, lack knowledge about the college culture, have parents who are not college graduates, fear the unknown, and do not have the local support they need (Baez, 2016; Hatch, & Garcia, 2017; Pleitz, MacDougall, Terry, Buckley, & Campbell, 2015; Velazquez-Torres, 2018; Wibrowski, Matthews, & Kitsantas, 2017). Velazquez-Torres (2018) further cited studies indicating summer bridge programs improved the retention rate by a full ten percentage points. Summer bridge programs have also been noted as paramount in reducing the associated stress of attending college during the first year (Fong et al., 2017). Furthermore, summer bridge programs can also be used to bring up the placement scores for academically challenged students. Studies have shown that students who participate in programs designed to

improve composition and math scores do significantly better on their placement tests. With today's technology, much of the remediation can be conducted online with remarkable success (Frost & Dreher, 2017).

One college, John Jay College, utilizes a first-year program called SEEK which requires students to attend a four-week summer bridge program if academically less prepared as identified by their SAT scores (Velazquez-Torres, 2018). During the summer bridge program, students are welcomed to the college by faculty, counselors, and peer mentors. Additionally, the new students are introduced to the SEEK program and are encouraged to participate in a meet and greet session with the staff. The students meet for the four weeks and engage in morning academic support courses, and during the afternoon extracurricular activities are led by the peer mentors (Velazquez-Torres, 2018). The students also take a battery of inventories designed to develop a profile, so the institution can customize the services and support needed. Hispanic students in the program have an 86% retention rate compared to 77% for those not in the program.

Additionally, summer bridge programs can also start in the Spring semester of those secondary schools which feed the community college population. There are many students who during their tenth and eleventh-grade years are committed to attending college but end up in the group of students who are non-matriculating (Fifolt, 2018). The summer bridge program which reaches out to students still in high school can stay the loss of anywhere from 2 and 15% of those students (Fifolt, 2018). Another study conducted at a historically black university found participation in the summer academy

improved retention into the next year by five percentage points (Johnson-Weeks & Superville, 2016). This information indicates that forming a strong partnership with area secondary schools is a must when students need to be informed about the expectations vs. the reality of college (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). Having a summer bridge program most certainly improves first-year retention rates at community colleges and if those programs are linked to a first-year seminar the implications are even higher for positive retention results (Howard & Flora, 2015; Permzadian & Crede, 2016; Skoglund & Kiene, 2018; Wibrowski et al., 2017). First-year seminars are designed to provide the support entering freshman need when navigating the higher education culture.

Peer Mentoring

The national retention rate for students who complete their first year of college plus returning to their home institution is 75% at a four-year institution; it is much lower at community colleges (DeAngelo, 2014). Knowing these statistics gives first-year programs a much higher level of priority if institutions wish to retain more students. In DeAngelo's (2014) study, she emphasized the importance of first-year students discussing course content outside of class as "the most important first-year experience for understanding which students intend to return to their initial college for the second year" (p. 61). Much of this discourse can be described as peer mentoring. Students talking to each other provides a level of personal investment in the institution which is one of Tinto's primary descriptors for keeping students from leaving higher education. Peer mentoring is one program which provides a level of support for first-year students so they

can receive modeling from students that have experienced similar situations and have triumphed. Peer mentoring has been shown to improve retention through boosting a student's self-efficacy (Collier, 2017; Kring, 2017; Plaskett, Bali, Nakkula, & Harris, 2018; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014).

At the City College of New York (CUNY), the institution has developed a peer mentoring program in their Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) program which targets low income, first-generation college students (Francis, Kelly, & Bell, 1993; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). CUNY recruit's students through their SEEK program to serve as SEEK Scholars also known as peer mentors. To be chosen as a peer mentor, SEEK Scholars must have a 3.2 GPA, completed four semesters, and attend two-day training to become mentors. The college provides mentor candidates with training in the needs of first-year students and an enhanced discussion on issues which create "blocks" or "barriers" to academic success (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). Through these discussions, Zevallos & Washburn (2014) describe how mentor candidates learn active listening skills, open-ended questioning techniques, and through role-playing "learn how to communicate" (p. 26).

Additionally, mentors are paid a decent stipend for their efforts. Zevallos and Washburn (2014) found that the mentoring was advantageous to both participants and enhances both motivation and academic performance, plus the program helps first-year students navigate some of the more complicated aspects of the collegial environment, thus, improving retention and leadership skills.

Peer mentoring has also been a positive support for students with disabilities. Specifically, those with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities have prospered under a peer mentorship program (Prevatt & Yelland, 2015). Without positive supports like peer mentorship, Prevatt and Yelland (2015) stated, “students with ADHD fail more grades, have worse scores on standardized tests, and have lower rates of college graduation” (p. 666). The study further outlined the need for ADHD coaching which can also take the shape of peer mentoring and noted the success rates for ADHD students showed marked improvements in grades and retention (Prevatt & Yelland, 2015). Community colleges often have many students enrolling with various learning disabilities which can push the importance of providing some support to a much higher level. Again, both mentoring partners experience benefits which improve self-efficacy which leads to higher academic performance and retention (Culnane, Eisenman, & Murphy, 2016).

Summary

The findings I collected in this study indicated the COMPASS exam did not contribute greatly to the student attrition issue at ACC. From my interviews with ACC students, faculty, and administrators and the themes that emerged, I now believe the 48% retention rate is far more due to issues related to work ethic, family obligations, and test preparedness. The literature review addressed these issues by examining three different programs had positive effects on retention and providing information to prospective students, so they can make a better-informed decision before enrolling in classes. These

three programs were chosen due to their high success rate, ease of implementation and low cost to operate.

The literature review clearly indicated that Accelerated Learning Programs benefit struggling students to a higher degree than regular remediation, thus, providing a clearer route to completing a degree (Adams & McKusick, 2014; Cho et al., 2012; Davidson & Wilson, 2017; Hanover Research, 2014; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010; Michigan Center for Student Success, 2016; Morris, 2015; Sides, 2016). The literature review also supported the use of Summer Bridge Programs which have been found to offset student attrition by as much as 10% by providing prospective students with information about the college culture and giving students both the academic and personal support they need to be successful (Baez, 2016; Fifolt, 2018; Fong et al., 2017; Frost & Dreher, 2017; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Pleitz et al., 2015; Velazquez-Torres, 2018; Wibrowski et al., 2017). Lastly, the use of Peer Mentoring is supported by a plethora of research and documented success at CUNY. Peer mentoring provides new students with a platform where they can discuss issues related to their experiences, thus, giving them a much needed increase in self-efficacy resulting in the needed connection to the college culture strongly suggested by Tinto's Student Persistence Model (Collier, 2017; DeAngelo, 2014; Kring, 2017; Plaskett et al., 2018; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). With these programs in place, ACC could find itself a model community college and be the flagship of what these programs can do for first-year students when implemented. With these successful programs in place the college could see as much as a 15% decrease in

student attrition during the first year thereby improving the institutions public image, increase in funding by both tuition and state grants, and improving the social wellbeing of the community it serves.

Project Description

It would be necessary to provide the faculty and administrators with the professional development to make an informed decision on whether they would be willing to support the three proposed programs. The professional development is accomplished by conducting a PowerPoint presentation outlining each program describing the benefits each one would bring to the college. Once a buy-in is achieved, it would be up to the institution to continue a fact-finding mission to determine specific implementation details. Those might include visiting area campuses which have similar programs and inviting specialists into the college to assess the needs. Additionally, potential barriers are identified and addressed.

Professional Development

I aim to provide the college stakeholders with a PowerPoint presentation outlining the aspects of each of the three programs, Accelerated Learning Programs, Summer Bridge Programs, and Peer Mentoring. The title of the presentation is Plugging the Gap, which gives reference to the gap where students disappear from college during their first year, some never to return. The objective of the professional development session is to provide the stakeholders with pertinent information regarding each of the programs proposed and to answer any concerns they may have regarding implementation. Much of

this would be discussed with the Vice-Chancellor of Academic Programs after the professional development program was completed and the participants agreed with the positive impacts these proposed programs would have on the college. Many of the sources examined put implementation at three years, but this would depend solely on the administration.

Potential Barriers

The program recommendations outlined in this study are designed to address the specific needs of ACC. Because funding is always a barrier to new things, I believe the college could implement most if not all the aspects of each program without additional funding. The Peer Mentoring program as described by CUNY provides a stipend to its Peer Mentors or Seek Scholars. This stipend can be provided by a federal grant or a community partner. Regarding staff, there would be a benefit to having a director on staff overseeing the retention programs and coordinating efforts to ensure program quality. However, this too could be accomplished with those already on staff at the college. With a partnership with local high schools, the Summer Bridge Program could be conducted on high school campuses using a college recruiter and high school faculty member.

Project Evaluation Plan

Because the genre of this project focused on policy recommendations, the evaluation plan will depend on whether the college adopts any of the three programs outlined in the professional development session. Additional evaluations would be conducted at the inception of the new programs and would cross-reference the first-year

student retention rate on a year to year basis to determine whether the impact of the program had the desired results. The evaluation would be outcomes-based which will require analysis of the data over a three-year period. Furthermore, student participants could complete a survey during and after participation in each of the programs to assist evaluators in identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Project Implications

The implications of this project hold vast importance to the local community. Increasing student retention would have great benefits for the college through increased funding due to student numbers, institutional prestige, and providing an educated workforce to those local businesses which require enhanced skills. Because the State of Arkansas has tied funding of higher education institutions to their retention rates, increasing retention would provide a fiscal boost of state funding and increased student tuition funds would also be another financial increase. Another byproduct of increasing student retention is the prestige the institution would receive with above average first-year student retention rates. This social change would bring more students into the college, thus, again increasing the student population and allowing a sustainable growth pattern for ACC for many years to come.

Conclusion

Although this project is specifically designed for the needs of ACC, my suggested policy recommendation may also have implications for all colleges and universities. More specifically, community colleges would benefit from the various retention

initiatives outlined in this section. The professional development session outlining the needs for improved retention is paramount to the continued success of ACC, not to mention its ability to provide more programs to improve community provisions.

Adopting any of these programs have been shown to decrease first-year student attrition and help future students gain access to post-secondary education. Section 3 presented a professional development opportunity based on the findings outlined in Section 2 and is strengthened by the literature review. Section 4 will give a comprehensive discussion on strengths, limitations, alternative approaches, and social change. Furthermore, directions for future research and a reflection on the importance of the work.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

This project study further declared the importance of positive first-year retention programs and the effectiveness they can have not only on the institution but the community as well. Additionally, this study is built around the findings. Beginning with an investigation into the COMPASS exam and trying to determine whether it had contributed to the first-year student retention conundrum, the data led me down a different path of inquiry. Students, faculty, and administration all believed the largest contributor to freshman retention was centered around three areas: work ethic, family obligations, and test preparedness. All of these areas can be addressed in the programs suggested in the professional development session.

The professional development outlined in Appendix D addresses the need for the college to enhance their efforts to create three programs to improve first-year retention. At the onset of this study, I hypothesized, based on the literature, that the COMPASS exam results contributed to the first-year attrition problem. With much of the literature exposing the shortcomings of the COMPASS exam, I wanted to determine if there was any connection between the COMPASS exam and the poor retention. However, after concluding the analysis of the data, I found a different set of reasons for the attrition of students at ACC. In response to the third research question, I believe these three programs have had significant efficacy in reducing first-year attrition. These programs will not only reduce freshman attrition but will increase the flow of new students as the

communities which feed the college discover the positive supports in place. Entrenched in the professional development are Alternative Learning Programs, Summer Bridge, and Peer Mentoring. All three of these programs have significant evidence in the research of their success at improving retention. Identifying these three successful programs is one of the strengths of this study and shows the study's design was the best choice.

The qualitative nature of this study allowed it to be guided by the data and not any preconceived opinions or beliefs. The basic qualitative method was one of the cornerstone strengths of this study. The choice to use the basic qualitative theory enabled the study to evolve as the data was analyzed. The evidence is clear as in the beginning I hypothesized that the COMPASS exam, and its placement scores, were an underlying cause to the first-year retention issue. However, as the data was analyzed, I found that other areas contributed a great deal more to student attrition and it was those areas which achieved the attention they deserved as the study formulated a possible solution.

Project Limitations

One of the limitations of this project was it is situated in a small community college and the data collected may not have application to other institutions. The project provides only an outline of programs which have had positive success rates at other colleges which will require further examination to customize each program to the needs of ACC. Additionally, once the presentation is completed, the stakeholders will need to assess the current staff and determine if any additions need to be located.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The research data analyzed noted three areas which require attention for the first-year retention rate to begin showing improvement. An alternative would be to implement each one separately allowing the institution time to assess each program individually. Separate implementation would also minimize any financial concerns, although, there may be sufficient staff resources already in place. Spreading out the implementation process would require more time for the full results to work. I recommend instituting the Alternative Learning Program first because existing staff members could accommodate the change much easier removing any need for locating additional faculty. This would streamline the remediation process allowing for the largest improvement in retention.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Since the beginning of this study, I have accrued a renewed respect for scholarship. My career in public education has always required me to stay abreast of the current pedagogical research, and this study has further confirmed the need to remain current with the practices in both pedagogy and andragogy. Higher education officials tasked with placement and retention practices must stay in constant state of active learning by gleaning the databases, journals, and books on the subject of first-year retention to develop the knowledge base necessary to have a positive impact on student attrition. I have learned this is important due to the extensive research required to formulate my presentation.

I have been a public educator in the field of special education for over 24 years, and I believe I am an effective practitioner. However, this study has helped me bridge the gap from secondary to post-secondary, further enhancing my ability to gain a much deeper understanding of the challenges students face as they transition from high school to college. I can now truly advise students from a much more informed set of background knowledge of what they can expect during their tenure in higher education. Furthermore, this study has also provided me with the skillset to feel comfortable in a higher education setting advising college-level students from a perspective of where they have been as students.

Being an instructional specialist, I have worked and taught professional development to other teachers, but this study has effectively prepared me to conduct future professional development using research-based data. Reading about best practices in the field of teaching and special education and finding pedagogical approaches have been a focal point in my past. Now it is essential to examine the research behind the practices and determine what makes these new approaches new. I have learned it is paramount that any professional development, if it is to be effective, must begin with analyzing the existing research and theoretical frameworks to examine existing findings about the topic.

I have also learned to be a better questioner. Through my interviews, I have noted during the data analysis that certain follow-up questions should have been asked and made notes where I should have asked those questions. Effective qualitative research

depends on the ability to ask questions and to follow-up certain answers with additional interrogative statements. Gaining a deeper appreciation for the art of questioning has also improved my teaching practices across my educational sphere of influence. Using the Socratic art of discourse in a classroom can lead both the instructor and the student into new areas of ideas and knowledge. This higher-level questioning is one of the issues which make the learner-centered classroom an ideal environment for the student and the instructor.

My ability for leadership has vastly improved during this study. During the early part of the doctoral process, I came across the works of John Kotter (2012) who has been recognized by many as the foremost authority on the topic of leadership and change. The Harvard professor wrote the following in his book, *Leading Change*, “Anchoring a new set of practices in a *college* culture is difficult enough when those approaches are consistent with the core of the culture (italics mine). When they aren’t, the challenge can be much greater” (Kotter, 2012, p. 163). As the global economy becomes a much more dominant force, colleges and universities must compete with their fellow institutions across the world. Embracing change is a leadership quality which requires some risk, but with the appropriate research base and the correct planning, change can be successful. I feel this is one of the most important of the many qualities of leadership I have learned over the course of this study.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

One of the foremost challenges in today's community college is the retention of its students. Today there are more students attending college than before any point in history. Most of today's students have new challenges that yesterday's students did not have to contend with and to have an effective support system in place will pay dividends in the future. Having effective retention programs in place has been proven to decrease attrition which enables the college to serve more students and, thus, provide the community with an educated workforce. I believe the study I have conducted will help ACC to improve its attrition issues and continue to grow into the paramount institution it is becoming. Implementing the programs, I have suggested will reduce the number of students lost to the college, retaining them to achieve their potential as community providers.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

I researched and developed this project to respond to the needs of ACC as it continues to endeavor to retain more students. By providing the stakeholders at the college with the research-based professional development, I have outlined three promising programs customized to the needs of ACC to offset the attrition of students. The implications of this study could lead to further research in retention programs to assist other colleges across the nation and world. Additionally, further qualitative research could be conducted on these programs as they are implemented to ascertain their effectiveness and add to the literature on the subject. Many action research projects could

be conducted within ACC to continue to assess student needs leading to more knowledge about student support furthering the research base.

Conclusion

The focus of this project study was to examine the COMPASS exam and determine whether its use as a placement test caused the loss of first-year students through attrition. An exhaustive literature review provided the framework and the correlation needed to substantiate the concerns. The data collected provided a rich delineation indicating the COMPASS bore little if any of the responsibility for the loss of students. Interviews with the students, faculty, and administrators changed the focal point of the study from the COMPASS test to customizing a series of programs to address the problems provided by the data. The professional development presentation outlined in Appendix D addressed those issues specifically for ACC but could also be modified to meet the needs of other colleges in the area to address their specific retention needs. It is critical that all the stakeholders understand they share in the responsibility for serving students in the maximum capacity they can. This critical focal-point includes the student, who holds their responsibility to fully understand the culture of the college campus and the challenges they could face as they continue their education.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Student Participants

Student Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a student at ACC?
2. What courses have you taken and to what extent do you believe you have experienced success?
3. Tell me about your experiences in the placement process?
4. Do you believe the entrance exam used was adequate in determining your academic proficiency level?
5. What is your opinion of the academic advising here at ACC?
6. What has been the best part of the placement process that you have experienced?
Why?
7. What is your general opinion of the placement process here at ACC?
8. Do you have any suggestions to improve the placement process?
9. Do you have any other concerns related to student success that you would like to comment on?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Faculty

1. How long have you worked in the field of higher education?
2. How many of those years have been at ACC?
3. What is the biggest problem facing first year students here at ACC?
4. Do you have many students who are not successful in your course? Why?
5. In your opinion, is the COMPASS test an adequate indicator of student success?
Why?

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Administrators

1. How long have you worked in the field of higher education?
2. How many of those years have been at ACC?
3. What do you see as the largest obstacle facing student placement here at UACCM?
4. What limitations do you believe the COMPASS test has as a placement tool in light of the data collected by the college?
5. What is your general opinion of the placement process here at UACCM?
6. In light of the data presented, what recommendations would you suggest to the college to improve its academic placement practices for new students?

Appendix D: Professional Development PowerPoint Presentation



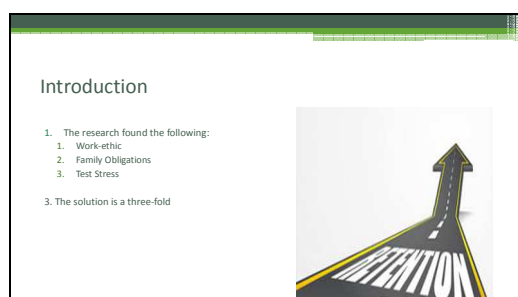
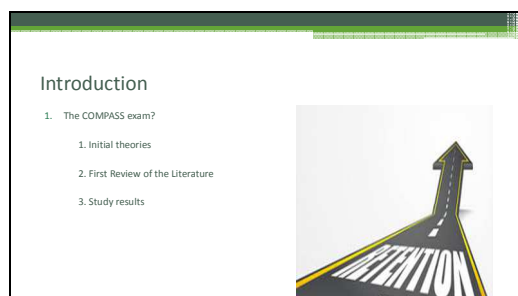
Introduction

Retention of students is a key focal point.

According to a 2017 ACT report the average retention rate for community colleges is 53% nationwide.

RVCC's retention rate for full time students is 54% and part-time students 41%.

Graduation rate for RVCC is 28% with an additional 12% transferring to other institutions.





Introduction

This presentation will identify three programs that have research-based data improving student retention by 5 to 10 percentage points.

- Accelerated Learning Programs
 - Summer Bridge Programs
 - Peer Mentoring
- Increasing retention equals increasing funding and reputation



Introduction

Credentials

- Graduated UCA 1994, BSE Special Education K-12
- Graduated Walden University 2009, MSE Special Education
- (Pending) Graduated Walden University 2019, EdD Higher Education Leadership
- Spent the last six years researching student retention at community colleges



Training Outline

- Lesson 1: Accelerated Learning Programs
 - Remediation coupled with college level courses
- Lesson 2: Summer Bridge Programs Enhanced
 - Increased visibility and recruitment in area high schools
 - Financial incentives for attending during summer
 - Partnering with area high schools
- Lesson 3: Peer Mentoring
 - Providing peer mentors as a level of support for new students.

Lesson 1: Objectives

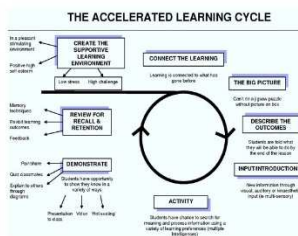
- List the intended outcomes for this training session.
- Each objective should be concise, should contain a verb, and should have a measurable result.
- Tip: Click and scroll in the notes pane below to see examples, or to add your own speaker notes.

Lesson 1: Accelerated Learning Programs



Lesson 1: What is an Accelerated Learning Program

- Remediation in overdrive
- Students who require math remediation will:
 - Take a college level math course
 - Also take remedial math
 - Both taught by the same instructor
 - Corequisite course has no prep for the instructor



Lesson 1: Accelerated Learning Program

- Who is Peter Adams?
 - Coordinator of Writing at the Community College of Baltimore County
 - Evaluated his remedial programs in writing
 - Found only a third of his students were passing.
 - Determined the remedial program was too long.
 - Adams (2009) described the pathway to success as a "pipeline that students must pass through to succeed, and the longer the pipeline, the more likely there will be leakage from it" (p. 53).

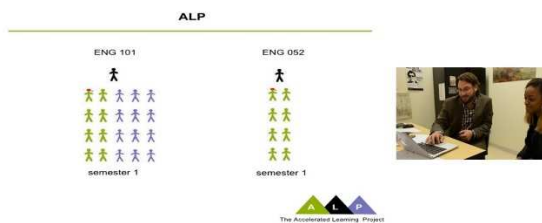


Lesson 1: Accelerated Learning Program

- Program is voluntary
- Needs based on Accuplacer Scores
- Student registers for the college level English course along with seven other remedial students
- Included are twelve other students who are stronger writers serving as role models
- Also enroll in a companion course of basic writing taught by the same instructor
- Companion class meets immediately after the college level English
- Students work on assigned work from English or answering questions from the students.



Lesson 1: Accelerated Learning Program



Lesson 1: Wrap-up

- Once the ALP program was in full swing
 - The ALP courses passed 63% of its students
 - Traditional course setup passed only 39%
 - This model can be used for both math and reading remediation

Lesson 2: Summer Bridge Programs



Lesson 2: Summer Bridge Programs?

- College transition intervention
- Offered to at-risk students
 - Lack knowledge about the college culture
 - First-gen college students
 - Fear the unknown
 - Lack of local support



Lesson 2: Summer Bridge Programs?

- Improve retention rates by 10 percent
- Reduces stress for first-year students
- Used as placement test preps
- Some remediation can be offered online
- The Bridge program can begin during the senior year at high school.



Lesson 2: Summer Bridge Programs?

- Students take a battery of inventories to develop a profile.
- Students need to be informed about the expectations vs. the reality of college.
- Furthers the student buy-in as outlined by Tinto.
- Can stay the loss of non-matriculating students by 2 to 15 percent.



Lesson 2: Wrap-up

- Can improve retention by 10 percentage points
- If conducted during the spring semester at a high school can save 2 to 15 percent of students.

Lesson 3: Peer Mentoring



Lesson 3: Peer Mentoring

- Students talking to each other provides personal investment, one of Tinto's constructs.
- Provides support to first-year students
 - Modeling from those who have experienced similar situations
 - And have triumphed over the difficulties
 - Sharing and developing coping skills

Lesson 3: Peer Mentoring

- City College of New Yorks (CUNY) SEEK program
 - Targets low income, first-generation students.
 - Provides training for SEEK Scholars who are chosen based on:
 - GPA
 - Completed four semesters of college
 - Attend a two-day training to become mentors
 - Provides a modest stipend
 - Trained in the needs of first-year students



ABOUT





Lesson 3: Peer Mentoring

- City College of New Yorks (CUNY) SEEK program
- Is advantageous to both participants by
 - Enhancing motivation
 - Academic performance
 - Helps first-year students navigate aspects of collegial environment
 - Improves retention and leadership skills
 - Also is a positive support for students with disabilities



Lesson 3: Wrap-up

- Peer mentoring provides:
 - Support for first-year students
 - Improves retention
 - Enhances academic performance and leadership skills



Summary

- All three of these programs have been strongly linked to improving retention by 2 to 15 percent.
- Would not require much if any new staff
- Improve the public perception of RVCC
- Provide increased funding for the college