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IT'S NOT THE PROGRAMS; IT'S THE PEOPLE: BUILDING HUMAN LEVERS OF RETENTION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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IT'S NOT THE PROGRAMS; IT'S THE PEOPLE: BUILDING HUMAN LEVERS OF
RETENTION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Education in the College of Education at the
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

IT'S NOT THE PROGRAMS; IT'S THE PEOPLE: BUILDING HUMAN LEVERS OF RETENTION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Student attrition prior to the completion of a credential is an issue that has increasingly demanded the attention of stakeholders in higher education, particularly in the community college sector, in which less than half of all students complete a credential after six years. The costs of student attrition are high and widespread, ranging from the financial costs for institutions and federal and state governments to the personal and monetary costs paid by those students whose personal and professional goals are not achieved. With the ever-increasing focus on accountability for institutions of higher education and the growing movement toward performance-based funding, institutions are seeking to find ways to support all students on the path to completion of a credential. Building upon Braxton's theory of powerful institutional levers that serve to promote student completion, Rendon's validation theory, and Schlossberg's theory of marginality versus mattering, this two-part companion dissertation seeks to progress conversation beyond levers of retention as programmatic approaches to increasing student success. Through interviews with community college students serving as peer mentors in a student ambassador program and community college faculty identified by peers and supervisors as high performing in the area of student retention, the researchers seek to identify common characteristics, behaviors, backgrounds, conditions, and values possessed by effective human levers of retention. In doing so, the researchers hope to identify common characteristics among successful human levers of retention in the form of peer mentors and faculty members. This work is in part a collaborative piece that should be read with Kim Russell's At the Heart of Policies and Programs: Community College Faculty Member and Peer Mentors as Human Levers of Retention.

KEYWORDS: Retention, Levers of Retention, Mattering, Validation, Peer Mentoring, Community College Students, Attrition

Kyle A. Barron

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March 29, 2019

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Date

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For my daughter, I was hoping to have finished this whole process before you got here. However, you had a plan of your own and wanted to be one of the many "cohort babies" that got to call their mom or dad a doctoral student. I am so happy that I will get to hold you as I take a picture in my "fancy hat."

For my dissertation partner. Kimberly Russell. I would not have completed this amazing project without you. The marrying of our two ideas is one that I believe can have true impact both today and for many years to come. I look forward to what the future has in store for both of us and there is no one else I would have rather had in the trenches with me. In a strange way we both embody our research you with the faculty and me with the mentoring. And at the end of the day, much like our research, we make each other better. Thank you, friend, for being "my kind of weird!"

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too many of you to thank individually, but one stands out above the rest. As a community

college freshman, I was able to find a great role model in Gerald Napoles. Gerald, thank

you for your friendship and guidance. You have pathed a great path for me to follow.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

As I examined my career trying to determine what singular topic has been so impactful to me that I would like to devote my life's research to the exploration and expansion of knowledge in the field, it was easy for me to settle in on the one thing that had altered my life and the lives of so many others that I had since come in contact with. For me mentoring was this significant and impacted my life and the lives of all the students that I had come into contact with over the years. I was very fortunate to have an amazing mentor befriend me my very first semester at a community college. While he was not a peer mentor, as he was an employee at the college, he was still working on furthering his education and only slightly ahead of me in his studies. I learned a great deal from my discussions with my mentor and he helped to shape my career. He helped me as I made the determination to go into working in community colleges, with the intent goal of earning a doctorate and possibly one day being a community college president.

Throughout my career I have focused on doing everything that I could to help as many students as I can on a daily basis. I recognize that for many, they are similar to me and they are the first in their immediate family to go to college. For these students there is likely no one in their immediate support network that they can call on for guidance and assistance as they seek to navigate the educational journey on their way to a brighter future for themselves and their families. While I certainly try my best to help all students at my college, it is physically impossible for me to help all of the students, there are simply too many of them and only one of me and I cannot be a good mentor if I take on too many at once. This realization drove me to look for alternative means to try and

encourage as many of the students as I can toward being successful, I would later learn that I was looking for what Braxton and Mundy (2001) termed successful "levers of retention", or the programs that institutions put into place to impact student retention and success. While their research had identified 47 levers, my heart was instinctively drawn toward that of peer mentoring. I believed at that time, through my own experiences in having a mentor for my early years of college, that mentoring was the best lever of retention that a college could implement in an effort to impact retention. However, what was unique about my own personal mentoring experience was that the mentor was close to my age and we shared similar life experiences, he was as close to a peer as one can get while still being an employee of the college. From that moment of realization on, my career has focused on implementing peer mentoring programs at colleges in some shape or fashion. The most successful of these implementations came from my time at Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKYCTC) in Bowling Green, KY.

In my role as Director of Student Life and Engagement at SKYCTC, I was able to implement a peer mentoring model that was based on more than just my personal experiences, though they still played a large role, it was primarily built on research. I began to learn about Nora, Crisp, Jacoby, Collier, and more as I sought to understand the potential impact that peer mentoring could have on my college and on the many students that I was unable to personally mentor through their educational journey. It was at this time that I also began my doctoral studies and I focused my research efforts on peer mentoring from nearly the beginning. As a result, the program that was created at SKYCTC was the first in the state and also has been incredibly successful from a

quantitative perspective. Annually it brings in more money to the college than it costs and helps to serve all incoming students to the tune of approximately 1,500 each year. However, I already know the quantitative data behind the program merely from my day to day work role. Instead, what interested me to learn more about, and that I believed would be more impactful than the numbers, was the stories of the individuals who had been a mentor to someone else. What was their experiences and what could be learned from them for the field that might help future or current peer mentoring programs expand and grow to reach and help more students? I had finally found my lever of retention and realized that there was a lack of research as to who was pulling the lever, thus my study began to take shape.

In my research on levers of retention, the idea that the individual behind the lever had not adequately had their story told began to truly intrigue me. How could so much be written on the topic of peer mentoring and yet minimal be written about the individual doing the mentoring? For that matter, how could so much be written about so many of the levers of retention and there not be adequate research on the individuals 'pulling' the lever, or the 'human levers of retention'? I then began to wonder if what I learned about the peer mentor and the practices and attitudes that they take toward their role might be similar to another group of 'human levers' in faculty? Fortunately, my colleague Kim Russell was interested in researching more thoroughly the faculty perspective as a human lever of retention.

Three manuscripts comprise this dissertation. Chapter two is a collaborate piece created in partnership with my partner, Kimberly Russell, who completed a companion

study in which the subjects were community college faculty serving as levers of retention, we examine characteristics and behaviors shared by both peer mentor and faculty human levers. The goal of this manuscript is to provide practitioners with information that may assist them in the hiring process for peer mentors and/or faculty as well as information that could help to guide and structure orientations, employee development programs, and ongoing training for both peer mentors and faculty members. For example, one element that was common among both peer mentors and faculty levers was a knowledge of campus and community resources coupled with the desire to connect students with those resources that would assist them in their pursuit of a credential. With that in mind, this manuscript serves to encourage peer mentor trainers and faculty developers to structure activities and trainings that assist both groups in becoming aware of campus resources and familiar with how to connect students with such resources. This manuscript seeks to highlight the common elements shared by peer mentor and faculty levers, further supporting the suggestion that human levers of retention engage in similar activities based on common motivations and attitudes.

Chapter three is a research study exploring the shared practices and attitudes of Kentucky's first peer mentoring program at a community college. I identify seven shared practices and attitudes that fall into two basic areas. The first, that the peer mentors have an understanding of the value of higher education and the cultural capital it takes to see the big picture: good organization, professionalism, being goal driven. And, the second being that they have a lot of academic capital (knowing how to study, how to work the class/faculty/academic work environments, how to build relationships with others to help them and nurture them, how to capitalize on resources including finding the funding to

make it all work). This chapter tells the story of the peer mentors at SKYCTC and how they have approached their role as a lever of retention.

Chapter four serves as a whitepaper for Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) to encourage the implementation of peer mentoring programs statewide at all 16 of the KCTCS colleges. In this chapter I go into the details of why peer mentoring is an impactful lever of retention, how to go about the hiring and training process taking into account the lessons learned from Chapter 3, how to measure and collect data to determine the success of the program and the financial benefits to the college for implementing such a program as we enter a new era of performance based funding in the State of Kentucky.

Chapter five serves as the conclusion of the dissertation and reflections that I have had through this process as well as anticipations for what I hope will come next. I believe that my work has the ability to allow me to truly help as many students as I can along their journey to a better life for themselves and their families through the utilization of a higher education. Peer mentoring has the ability to play a substantial role in their individual education and if the practices and attitudes of the peer mentors at SKYCTC are used as a training tool, the potential impact of future human levers of retention are significant for the state and for the individual entering KCTCS.

Lastly, this work is intended for the practitioner and as such will hopefully have useful information that can be put to practice at the community college level. It is my hope that this work, in some way, repays the countless hours of mentoring that I myself have received and does justice to the human levers of retention that participated in the

research. It is their role and impact that is so significant and worthy of being studied and documented. The impact that they have had on now over 6,000 students in the four years of the program is one that is truly remarkable and I hope I did it justice.

Chapter 2
Attrition and Community College Students: Open Access for All, Success for Few
Kimberly Russell and Kyle Barron

Introduction

In 2009 President Barack Obama extolled the virtues of the American community college, known for their affordability, open admissions policies, responsive course scheduling, convenience of locations, and responsiveness to business and industry ("Building American skills through community colleges", 2009). Obama, who set two important national goals of once again leading the world in proportion of college graduates and graduating and additional five million community college graduates, contended that, in order to increase the economic strength of the nation, it is essential to educate American workers ("The American graduation initiative: stronger American skills through community colleges", 2009).

The largest segment of the nation's higher education system, enrolling around six million students annually, the community college has great potential to be a truly equitable institution that provides not only access to higher education for all but also equal opportunities for success.   However, today's community college does not currently accomplish those goals (Beach, 2011). Less than half of the students who enroll at a community college will complete any kind of credential. Two-year associate degree-granting public colleges, which enroll around half of all undergraduates in the United States, suffer the most significant student attrition rate, with approximately half of all students nationally leaving college before the second year (Barefoot, 2004). The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) (2010) stated, "The United

States, long ranked first worldwide [in proportion of college graduates] now ranks 10th in the percentage of young adults who hold a college degree" ("The heart of student success: Teaching, learning, and college completion"). Further, CCCSE indicated that only around one-fourth of the full-time community college students seeking associate's degrees complete a certificate or degree within three years, and less than half of community college students who seek a degree or certificate have earned one six years later. In 2018, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) cited data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which indicated that around 40% of those students enrolling for the first time in community college in 2012 had completed any kind of credential six years later, with completion rates being significantly lower for students attending part time, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students from underrepresented minority populations. Indeed, as Baime and Baum (2016) observed, completion rates across the sector have remained stagnant for a number of years in spite of increased attention to the problem.

Baime and Baum (2016) reported that the National Student Clearinghouse found in 2011—2012 that community college students were significantly more likely to come from the lowest family-income bracket and were also more likely to be a first-generation college students. Both of these factors are correlated with an increased likelihood of attrition. In addition, a much higher percentage of community college students worked either full or part time when compared with students attending four-year institutions. Again, this characteristic makes community college students less likely to successfully complete coursework and earn a credential.

The impact of students leaving college before completing a credential is often negative for institutions and students alike. Institutions of higher education lose thousands of dollars in unrealized revenue for each student who leaves without completing a credential (DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka, 2004). Loss of student tuition dollars, particularly for privately funded institutions can have a catastrophic effect on budgets, and state-funded institutions may also lose state funding if state legislatures tie funding to graduation rates (Barefoot, 2004). Departure rates affect enrollment stability, institutional budgets, and public perception of the quality of institutions (Braxton et al, 2004). Additionally, in today's age of performance-based funding, colleges must be prepared for the consequences of the trend toward performance-based funding, which "continues to hold great appeal to state policymakers who struggle with the tension between growing dissatisfaction with student completions rates on the one hand and limited state tax revenues on the other" (Palmer, 2014, p. 127). Finally, as community college students are more likely to default on their student loans (19.1% default rate for the community college sector compared to 7.6% for public four-year institutions) institutions could potentially face high penalties or even risk losing the ability to distribute federal financial aid (Baime and Baum, 2016).

Regarding students, Kuh et al. (2005) reported, "virtually all forecasters agree that to be economically self-sufficient in the information-driven world economy, some form of postsecondary education is essential, with a baccalaureate degree being much preferable" (p. xiii). For many individuals, particularly those from traditionally underserved populations, community college represents their best if not their only hope for achieving that essential economic self-sufficiency.

Student persistence should also be a public concern because college educated citizens are more likely to contribute to societal good and less likely to engage in "harmful behaviors" (Barnett, 2011, p. 193). Further, CCCSE (2010) argued that college completion has both financial and democratic benefits, stating, "The higher a person's educational attainment, the more likely he or she is to be gainfully employed, pay taxes, and be capable of taking care of the health and educational needs of his or her children. Conversely, higher levels of education make it less likely for individuals to be publicly dependent" ("The heart of student success: Teaching, learning, and college completion").

Further, as success rates vary greatly across demographic groups, today's students who complete a credential, particularly a baccalaureate degree, are more likely to have their children successfully complete a credential in future (Baime and Baum, 2016).

Braxton et al. (2004) encouraged readers to think beyond the financial consequences of student attrition and consider the moral obligation that institutions have to their students. Often those who drop out of college decide never to return, forever constraining their opportunities in life. Considering student retention an issue of developing human potential, Braxton et al. (2004) lamented, "Individuals who do not continue may lead vastly different lives from those they would lead if they had completed their course of study" (p. xi).

Postsecondary administrators must be "cognizant of the reasons why students depart from institutions of higher learning prematurely and what can be done to help students overcome these barriers so they can achieve their academic and career goals"

(Roberts and Styron, 2010, p. 2). Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) suggested, "When a proper balance is maintained between challenge and support, students are positioned to succeed in college" (p. 11). In order to find the balance, the authors urged that institutions of higher education are responsible for creating learning environments that will support these two goals. Baime and Baum (2016) encourage policy makers to develop policies that will "incorporate an understanding of who the students enrolling in community colleges are and under what circumstances they are most likely to succeed, in addition to the investment of the resources required to diminish the financial and nonfinancial barriers facing many students in this sector" (p. 21).

Persistence of community college students toward the completion of a credential is a subject that has received a great deal of attention from researchers in the past several decades due to the economic, social, political, and personal impacts of college student attrition. The ever-growing emphasis on institutional accountability and the trend toward linking student outcomes to institutional funding has led to an even greater interest in working out what Braxton (2000) called "the student departure puzzle." According to Fike and Fike (2016), "Understanding why student choose to leave or choose to stay is essential to those wanting to make a difference in students' lives" (p. 68).

Factors Influencing Attrition among Commuter Students

The community college, for many traditionally underrepresented populations, represents one of the only opportunities for people to have a chance at a better life for themselves and their families. The ease of access combined with low tuition rates have contributed to the fact that "the typical community college student possesses different

characteristics than the traditional university student" (Fike and Fike, 2016, p. 69). Community college students often bring with them unique challenges that can potentially impact their ability to persist toward degree completion. Community colleges serve significantly overrepresented populations of students at risk of attrition, such as "minority students, first-generation students, students with lower levels of academic achievement in high school, and students from low-income families" (Bailey and Alfonso, 2005, p. 5) and students who attend part-time, work long hours at off-campus jobs, and have dependent children. Goldrick-Rab (2007) suggested that consistently low community college persistence and completion rates could be attributed to "the complex ways in which social and educational inequalities affect specific students and the institutions of higher education designed to serve them." McClenney (2013) expressed that today's community college students are a "wildly diverse" (p. 26) group, making it difficult to create, deliver, and sustain initiatives that will serve the population well and encourage more widespread success across the sector.

The traditional characteristics that influence college completion for community college students are not necessarily the same as those students enrolled in residential colleges and universities; though the majority of research related to college student retention does not specifically address the issues faced by commuter students in open access institutions. Commuter students—often enrolled only part-time—typically have multiple life roles that often take priority over their role as a college student and face challenges that often do not exist for traditional students at residential institutions. Commuting is negatively related to completion of a degree, and institutions must seek to understand the unique needs of these students to implement strategies that will reduce

attrition (Jacoby and Garland, 2004).   As Hess (2018) explained, community college

students, the vast majority of whom are commuters, are much more likely than their

counterparts to face housing and food insecurity, further complicating students' ability to

successfully complete academic tasks. In addition, community college students are much

more likely to work (both part-time and full-time) or enroll in coursework on a part-time

basis, with both serve as risk factors for attrition (Baime and Baum, 2016).

Yet often institutions and researchers continue to "believe the myth of what works

for traditional on-campus residential students works equally well for commuter students

if they would just be a little more serious about their education" (Jacoby and Garland,

2004, p. 63). The authors categorized the core needs and challenges of commuter

students: transportation, a variety of life roles, limited support networks off campus, and

a sense of belonging on campus. Referring to adult commuter students (those over 25

years of age), Schlossberg et al. (1991) noted that these students make a great deal of

both emotional and financial sacrifices to attend college and "struggle with situational,

personal, and institutional barriers at considerable self-sacrifice" (p. 220).

Commuter Student Persistence Models

In Braxton et al.'s (2014) revision of Tinto's model, particularly as it relates to

commuter students, the authors noted that empirical evidence from a study of commuter

students does not necessarily support all parts of Tinto's model. According to Braxton

(2014), Tinto's theory of student persistence "puts emphasis on the student's

interpretation of their interactions with the academic and social communities of a given

college or university" (p. 73). Tinto suggested that "students enter a college or university

with varying patterns of personal, family, and academic characteristics and skills, including personal dispositions and intentions with respect to college attendance and personal goals" (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, p. 51). Then, according to Pascarella and Terenzini, interactions between the individual and the institution help to shape the students' intentions and commitments toward the institution longitudinally.

The authors explain that Tinto's theory suggests "Satisfying and rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution are presumed to lead to greater integration in those systems and thus to student retention" (p. 51). Braxton et al. (2014) explained that Tinto "postulates that academic and social integration influence a student's subsequent commitments to the institution and to the goal of graduation" (p. 74). Braxton and his colleagues, however, question the validity of the Tinto framework to explain the student departure process, particularly as it relates to commuter students. According to Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), Tinto's interactionalist theory does not adequately address the unique characteristics of commuter institutions, which the authors state "lack well-defined and –structured social communities for students to establish membership" (p. 35) and are attended by students who "typically experience conflicts among their obligations to family, work, and college" (p. 35).

Tinto (1997) later acknowledged that students who commute to college, particularly those who have numerous external obligations, do not have the opportunities for social integration that students in residential colleges are given. In their discussion of the campus environment, Braxton et al. (2014) observed that commuter students typically spend their time on campus hurrying to attend classes and engage in activities necessary

to meeting degree requirements, and the authors observed that students typically then leave campus in a hurry to meet personal or work obligations off campus, limiting the kinds of social involvement for students at these institutions. According to Braxton et al. (2014), "These forms of comings and goings create a 'buzzing confusion'" (p. 113) that students must learn to adjust to if they are to make progress toward completion. The buzzing confusion contributes to commuter students' need "to believe that attending college will result in academic success and graduation" (p. 114). Further, the authors asserted that "the lack of well-defined and ill-structure student social communities poses difficulties to students with a need for social affiliation" (p. 115).

Understanding the factors that influence both attrition and persistence among community college students can help policymakers to better serve those students. Goldrick-Rab (2007) concluded her literature review of studies related to commuter study persistence that students' "family backgrounds, prior education experiences, and educational expectations" [often fail] to "intersect with colleges' institutional structures, practices, and policies" (p. 1). Attrition can be related to factors such as poor academic progress or financial problems, but research has also suggested that attrition can also stem from "a poor academic self-concept, a lack of motivation, and minimal social integration and adjustment" (Hoffman, 2014, p. 13). Students have also shown that students are more committed to an institution that appears to be true to its goals and mission and displays concern for the students' welfare (Braxton et al, 2014; Kuh et al., 2005).

Policymakers, college administrators, faculty developers, student affairs personnel, and a variety of other stakeholders can better serve commuter students when they are informed by empirical studies that are focused upon those who work regularly

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with commuter students in community colleges. By first understanding the challenges traditionally faced by the community college commuter student and the becoming informed about successful approaches to meeting the unique needs of community college students, stakeholders have a much stronger chance to have a positive impact on student persistence toward a credential.

The Community College Student Departure Puzzle: No Single Solution

 "College student departure poses a puzzle to college and university administrators" (Braxton and Mundy, 2001, p. 91), a complex and ill-structured puzzle that requires numerous solutions that complement one another and meet a variety of student needs rather than a single solution that strives to meet every need of every student. Various theoretical perspectives can help scholars to understand the problem of student attrition, perspectives that consider the impact of a variety of forces at work in students' educational experiences. In Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) synthesis of a body of research related to college outcomes, the authors concluded that a singular, institution-wide solution is considerably less effective than a combination of endeavors across many influential, diverse sub-environments in impacting student persistence.

Braxton and Mundy (2001) classified 47 different recommendations provided by several articles included in a special issue of the *Journal of College Student Retention*. Categorizing the recommendations into three specific areas based upon Tinto's (1993) highly influential book *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (2nd ed.),* Braxton and Mundy echoed Tinto's finding that "principles of effective retention must also guide institutional practices designed to reduce student rates

of departure" (p. 94). The authors found that 44 of the 47 recommendations embraced at least one of Tinto's three principles, and Braxton and Mundy argued that such recommendations "hold substantial promise for reducing institutional rates of student departure" (p. 103) based upon the fact that each of the recommendations has empirical support, and all but three of the recommendations can be classified as embodying one or more of Tinto's three principles.

According to Tinto (1993), the first principle of effective retention is a consistent and ongoing institutional commitment to student welfare that is demonstrated by the entire college community. In other words, students in this environment clearly understand that the institution is student-centered. The second principal of effective retention is a clear commitment on the part of the institution to the quality education of all students. Finally, social and academic integration into the campus community is the third principle of effective retention. According to this principle, institutions strive to help students to build strong bonds between themselves, their peers, the faculty, and the staff of the institution.

At the heart of these institutional levers described and categorized by Braxton and Mundy (2001), though, is the importance of the people within institutions. Without people willing to help these levers to function effectively, the policies and programs outlined by Braxton and Mundy cannot serve as powerful levers that positively influence student persistence. Two groups that have a substantial influence on retention of students are faculty and peers, making it imperative that studies be conducted that seek to understand more deeply the individuals who serve in these roles.

Mattering and Validation as a Framework for Understanding the Roles and the Value of Human Levers

Two theories that provide at theoretical framework for understanding student departure and Rendon's (1994) Validation Theory and Schlossberg's (1989) mattering theory. Both theories serve to explain the way in which both faculty-student interactions and student-student interactions help students to successfully make the transition to college and persist toward the completion of a credential. Though both theories are most often connected with faculty-student interactions, the theories can also be applied to the understanding of the role of interactions between students and their peers.

Rendon (1994) discussed both in and out of class interactions that can help to validate students and contribute to supporting academic and social integration into the institution. Validation occurs when someone actively reaches out to support students in their academic endeavors and affirms their ability to be successful, powerful learners. Rendon's (1994) theory of validation provides insight into the importance of student-faculty interactions. For example, today's diverse student body is more likely to feel alienated by traditional college culture in which competition and passive learning are the common practice. Rendon's data from interviews collected from diverse community college students found that faculty who fostered academic validation in interactions with students both in and out of class helped students to "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (p. 40).

Rendon's (1994) study indicated that students were transformed by "incidents where some individual, either in-or out-of-class, took an active interest in them—when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as

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being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic efforts and social adjustment" (p. 44). In Rendon's keynote address to the American River Community College (1994), she noted that students, particularly non-traditional and culturally diverse students, will be more likely to persist if faculty members help students to develop positive attitudes about their capacity to learn, actively support students in their academic endeavors, and affirm their ability to be successful, powerful learners. Further, she urged that this validation must occur in a student's critical first semester.

Validation may actually be more important than academic and social integration (Barnett, 2011). Barnett's study of community college students suggested that "higher levels of faculty validation modestly predicted increases in students' intent to persist, with three sub-constructs of validation (caring instruction, students feeling known and valued, and students being mentored by faculty members) showing significant impact on students' intent to persist.

Similar to Rendon's validation theory is the concept of mattering, originally introduced by Morris Rosenberg in 1981, which is "defined as the perception that, to some degree and in any variety of ways, we are a significant part of the world around us" (Elliott and Kao, 2004, p. 339). Schlossberg's (1989) theory of college students' mattering and marginality proposed that when adult students feel that they matter, they are more likely to be more engaged in their learning (Shelly, 2014). Schlossberg et al. (1991) argued that, for many adult learners, the feeling of mattering, "may be the single element that makes the difference in their completing their degrees and developing a feeling of satisfaction and a sense of belonging" (p. 201). Mattering has four components—attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence; and reflexive

practitioners within institutions can encourage students' feelings of mattering by considering each of these elements (Schlossberg, 1991).

Becoming a college student marks a role change or transition for an individual, and these sorts of changes pose a risk for a person to feel marginalized (Schlossberg, 1991). Applying the concept of mattering to higher education, Schlossberg suggested that commuter students have been made to feel marginalized by the institutions, which is the opposite of mattering. Further, she contended that in a period of transition, feeling marginalized puts students at risk of attrition. As Schlossberg (1989) explained, often commuter students themselves as well as college personnel can view students' transition to higher education as a "non-event," it is important to understand the challenges that occur during transitional periods. Further, many students enroll in community college due to other transitions in their lives such as changes in employment or divorces. She explained that commuter students often do not feel control over their lives or a sense of confidence in their ability to meet standards set by professors.

Students need to feel that others have noticed them and are interested in them, that others care about what happens to them, that other people are proud of their successes and concerned about their failures, that they are needed by others, and that others notice their efforts (Shelly, 2014). According to Shelly (2014), "Knowing that we matter helps us to persist through our discomfort when we change roles or when we move from a familiar and safe environment to a new and challenging one" (p. 3).

Faculty as Levers of Retention

Without faculty who are willing to participate in and then actively use training in areas such as active learning, collaborative learning, or knowledge of campus resources; these levers cannot function to support retention of students. Institutions depend upon faculty who are committed to supporting a student-centered environment that demonstrates to students that the institution is committed to their welfare and their learning. Further, if faculty are not willing to build supportive, strong relationships with students, then meeting the needs of a diverse student population, particularly in the community college sector, is difficulty if not impossible. Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) asserted, "There can be little doubt about the need for faculty members' acceptance of their roles and responsibilities for student learning and for their active involvement in students' lives" (p. 655).

Teachers "are at the heart of the community college mission and serve the learning needs of their communities in essential and unique ways" (Miller, 1997, p. 83). However, theories of student persistence often ignore the impact of the classroom or at least "have not seen it as the centerpiece of their efforts to promote student persistence, preferring instead to locate those efforts outside the classroom in the domain of student affairs" (Tinto, 1997, p. 599—600).

Barnett (2010) echoed Tinto's observation that little research has focused specifically on retention in the community college, particularly as it relates to the classroom experience. According to Barnett, commuters are typically present on campus only during class meetings, and "the only college representatives with whom they regularly interact are faculty members" (p. 194). McArthur (2010) noted that, for commuter students, "The faculty members represent the authority figure, the mentor, and

the role model that may not appear anywhere else in the student's life" (p. 2), and besides peers, are the most important factor in a student's development.

Kuh et al. (2005) discussed Chickering and Gamson's (1987) "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," pointing out that along with active learning and good teaching practice, other indicators include cooperation among students, "prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning" (p. 8). According to Kuh et al. (2005), these conditions correlate with student satisfaction and persistence, and, thus, "educationally effective colleges and universities—those that add value—channel students' energies toward appropriate activities and engage them at a high level in these activities" (p. 9). A longitudinal study of 19 institutions and found that "overall exposure to organized and clear classroom instruction during the first year of college has a net positive influence on the probability of reenrolling at an institution for the second year of college" (Pascarella et al, 2011, p. 16).

According to the Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000), comparing students who experience active learning to the students who do not participate in classes in which active learning is a component, those "who infrequently experience active learning in their courses may become socially isolated in order to improve their academic performance in their courses" (p. 572). Students experience disengagement and dissatisfaction when they find no meaning an relevance in their learning experiences (Roberts and Styron, 2010, p. 5).

Braxton et al. (2014) described the importance of faculty-student contact to help support student persistence. The authors suggested that all first-year students should have access to full-time, tenure- track faculty. Both in and out of classroom interactions with such faculty can significantly influence student persistence (Baker and Griffin, 2010). Therefore, faculty approachability is vital to student persistence. Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010) argued, "Student-faculty interactions can be crucial in developing students' academic self-concept and enhancing their motivation and achievement" (p. 332). The authors suggested that institutions that promote quality student-faculty interactions reap a variety of benefits from the practice because students have a fundamental human need to belong and to feel cared for. Fuentes et al. (2013) suggested that faculty should initiate early and regular contact with students, particularly those who are *not* necessarily considered "rising stars," because these students are typically less likely to seek out interactions with faculty.

According to Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010), student-faculty interactions have a "multidimensional influence on the cognitive and emotional needs of students" (p. 334), including promoting high academic self-confidence, competence in the academic field, communication skills, and general problem solving ability. The authors described various aspects of positive student-faculty interactions, including respect, guidance, approachability, concern, connectedness, accessibility, and interactions outside of class. Hoffman (2014) described the qualities of an approachable faculty member, explaining, "Professors who are perceived as approachable and caring make themselves available for conversations outside of their academic role, focus on life lessons, and are more willing to answer questions" (p. 14). Shelton (2001) reported that

the outcomes of positive faculty-student interactions include "professional socialization, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, improved self-concept, and enhanced motivation for learning" (p. 70). According to Shelton (2001), students describe a variety of faculty behaviors as supportive and helpful, including

helping them gain a sense of competency and self-worth […], being approachable, encouraging students, demonstrating interest in students, having realistic expectations, listening, conveying confidence in and respect for students, being nonjudgmental, being honest and direct, being open to different points of view, and wanting students to succeed. (p. 71).

There is no substitute for human contact between faculty and students, and faculty members must make interactions with students a priority (Kinzie 2005). Additionally, interactions with students assist faculty members in better knowing and understanding their students so that they can more effectively connect course content with students' prior knowledge, talents, and experiences (Kinzie, 2005). Hoffman (2014) pointed out that, when faculty fail to build respectful and caring relationships with students, students sense that faculty members have given up on them, which "often results in diminished self-esteem, disengagement from classroom activity, and possible failure to complete the course" (p. 14).

In reflecting upon the body of research describing the impact faculty members have upon student persistence, it becomes apparent that research should be conducted that is focused upon studying the faculty members as potential levers of retention. If institutions seek to leverage the power of faculty members as a resources that positively

impact the retention of students, then it will be important to know more about the background traits, values, professional development experiences, classroom behaviors, educational philosophies, and strategies for working with students of faculty members who are successful at this task. This information can then inform hiring processes, orientation and training of faculty, and the evaluation criteria for community college faculty.

Peer Mentors as Human Levers of Retention

Tinto's (1993) model of student retention hinges on the importance of social integration, notably that there is a direct relation between the interaction with a peer and the likelihood of success and retention of a student. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discussed the power of peers to positively influence student persistence, citing that interacting with peers "enhances one's social integration and interpersonal bonds with the institution," (p. 390) when serves to intensify a student's "commitment and likelihood of persisting at the institution and completing one's degree" (p. 390). The authors explain that interactions with peers expose students to supportive social networks that influence students' educational aspirations as well as provide students with knowledge of personal and educational resources.

One of the levers that many community colleges have chosen in order to address the need to support student completion is the development and implementation of peer mentoring programs. Pairing new students with more experience peers can "help ease their transition and show them a way to persist when the path gets tough" (Pasket et al, 2018, p. 48). And as the literature on community college students indicates, the path is

often fairly tough from the very beginning of their college journey. The authors explained that first-generation college students, which Nomi (2005) reported make up nearly half of the nation's community college student bodies, are often left to try to figure things out on their own when it comes to postsecondary education, and this approach does not always end well.

First generation college students, in particular, often have little or no guidance and "cannot rely on family members' insider knowledge of higher education to guide them on the path to college" (Paskett et al, 2018, p. 47). Rivera et al. (2013) presented study results that demonstrated lower academic performance among first generation students when compared to their non-first generation peers. The authors also discussed a correlation between first generation students and limited financial literacy, which can lead to additional stress and hardship. Additionally, their review of literature led them to conclude that first generation students tend to work more hours per week than their peers and often report a lack of family support of their educational plans and goals. Finally, Rivera et al. (2013) explained that first generation students can struggle to integrate socially with peers on campus and make connections with faculty members and "may experience feelings of confusion, isolation, and shame at being a FGS and may not feel comfortable transitioning to and engaging with their new community" (p. 16), possibly contributing to a student's poor sense of belonging, feelings of loneliness, mental health problems, and inability to make the transition to college student, which can ultimately lead to attrition.

Bonin (2013) defined a peer mentor as a "guide who helps first year students navigate through academic, social, and personal difficulties" with the goal of

transitioning a mentee from high school into college by "decreasing stress through informal, caring relationships" ("Effect […]").   Bonin reported that the studies she reviewed suggested several outcomes for mentees in peer mentoring relationships: improved socialization and learning experiences for mentees, enhanced academic skills, more effective time management, improved communication skills and problem-solving skills, and increased self-efficacy. Paskett et al. (2018) determined that peer mentoring has the potential to produce numerous benefits for new college students: improved financial literacy, better informed ability to select courses and academic programs, increased involvement in campus organizations and activities, improved study skills, and improved self-confidence.

Paskett, et al. (2018), who studied an undergraduate peer mentoring program at the University of Pennsylvania, pointed out that high schools, colleges, and universities often have limited human resources to meet the array of needs and address the variety of problems and concerns of first-year students. They observed that students, particularly first-generation college students, often must adopt a "learn as you go" approach to getting started in college because they do not have adequate family modeling. However, the authors suggest, "Trial and error is hardly a recipe for sustained success, especially when students confront challenges that they don't know how to manage. If anything, this persistent state of insecurity can lead to imposter syndrome (i.e., feeling fraudulent, inadequate, and incompetent among peers)" (p. 48).

Lessons from Faculty and Peer Mentors Identified as Potential Levers of Retention

The Study

During the 2017-2018 academic year, we conducted an explorative qualitative study with the goal of examining, from the perspective of faculty and peer mentors, ways in which community colleges might positively impact student persistence by leveraging their existing resources, namely their faculty and students themselves. By conducting companion studies at two institutions of the ways in which peer mentors and faculty members conceive of their roles within those institutions, we hoped to determine what traits, behaviors, attitudes, and skills held by these campus players could potentially positively influence retention. Our goal was to discover common themes and characteristics among those faculty members and peer mentors in order to better understand the knowledge, skills, preparation, and behavior of a human lever of retention.

Glesne (2006) explained that qualitative research seeks "to make sense of personal narratives and the ways in which they intersect" (p. 1). Qualitative methods, particularly interviewing, allows researchers "to acquire a rich understanding of other people's lives and experiences" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. vii). According to Glesne (2006), "Qualitative research methods are used to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions" (p. 4).

Qualitative methods allow researchers to explore and make sense of "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). The assumption in this study, then, is that the peer mentors and faculty members who

have been identified as being the human levers of retention would provide the best insight into the phenomenon of actually being one of those individuals. They are the best sources of data to explain their backgrounds, their experiences, their philosophies, their challenges, and their approaches to their work.

Interviews were conducted during the spring 2018 semester at both sites of the study. The first set of interviews—focused on participants' backgrounds, duties, and careers—were conducted from late January through the end of February. The second set of interviews, which asked participants to share more about their personal philosophy as it relates to their work as well as their specific experiences and approaches when working with students, took place in late March and early April. The final interviews were group interviews in which all faculty participants met with both researchers in one meeting. Then all peer mentor participants met as a group with both researchers in the same meeting. These meetings took place in May after final exam week was over.

It is difficult to determine whether or not the timeline of the study had an effect on the participants and/or the data. Each part of a semester offers its own specific challenges and opportunities. For example, in the first part of the semester when the first interviews took place, faculty and peer mentors were just getting used to new students and new routines. They had recently emerged from three weeks to a month of time off from classes. The second interviews, however, took place after midterm for all faculty and peer mentors, giving them a bit more perspective in regard to that particular semester. At that time in the semester, typically, there is a sense that the honeymoon is over, meaning that both faculty and peer mentors had already encountered a number of situations in which students were struggling or leaving classes. However, at that point in

the semester, the participants had been given the time to build relationships with their students and encourage them to continue toward course completion. Finally, the group meetings had quite a celebratory yet reflective tone. Both faculty and peer mentors seemed demonstrably relieved to have completed the spring semester, and both groups expressed both a need for a break as well as a sense of excitement for upcoming semesters and endeavors. In fact, the final interview could be likened to a gathering on New Year's Eve, during which people reminisce about the year that has passed and also set goals and look forward to what the next year will bring.

The following questions guided the research:

A. In what ways do those identified as human levers of retention intentionally seek to positively influence retention and student success?

B. What common background characteristics, behaviors, motivations, strengths, priorities, attitudes, and approaches to working with students are shared by those identified as human levers of retention? In what ways do they feel they are distinguished from their colleagues in this area?

Site and Participant Selection: Peer Mentors

We selected Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKYCTC) as the site for the peer mentor study because the college has an established peer mentoring program and has collected several semesters' worth of student retention data that indicate that the program may correlate with some of the gains in student persistence semester-to-semester. Since developing and implementing the peer

mentoring program, retention of first-semester students at SKYCTC has increased up to 15% when compared to the retention rate prior to the program.

The Student Ambassador Program SKYCTC is the first of its kind in KCTCS. Student Ambassadors at SKYCTC have completed at least 12 credit hours at SKYCTC, maintained at least a 3.0 GPA, and have obtained a letter of recommendation from a faculty member in order to be considered for employment as a peer mentor. Student Ambassadors are paid $10 per hour for 15 hours per week to serve as peer mentors for incoming students to the college. They are provided with 30 hours of training focused upon how to be a successful peer mentor and what their role in retention and student success will consist of. All 43 current and former Student Ambassadors as of August 2017 were invited to participate in the research study. Each of the peer mentors was provided with a list of criteria describing effective mentoring behaviors and practices that we generated based upon an extensive review of literature. Potential participants then were asked to self-select for participation if they felt that these criteria accurately described them as peer mentors.

<center>Site and Participant Selection: Faculty</center>

The faculty population for this study consisted of general education faculty at West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC). The faculty at this institution have been recognized by the Aspen Institute four times between 2011 and 2017 for their role in promoting student success as demonstrated by graduation rates, transfer rates, and student learning outcomes data. Participation was limited to general education faculty members because students earning any associate's degree must

complete several general education courses in order to complete their academic programs, and institutional data suggests that these courses typically possess higher rates of attrition than do courses in career and technical education programs (such as welding, collision repair, and industrial maintenance) and particularly selective admission programs (such as nursing, dental assisting, or physical therapy assistant). We made the decision to focus on faculty who teach in courses typically considered "gate keeper" courses that are required by many transfer, technical, or selective admission programs.

Participants in the faculty study were recruited based recommendations from several parties representing a variety of constituencies on campus. Those constituencies were selected based upon their knowledge of and experience with the general education faculty either through supervision, collaboration, evaluation, or reputation. The following parties provided recommendations: Vice President of Academic Affairs, Vice President of Student Development, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs, Director of TRiO (Student Support Services), Chair of the Faculty Council, Dean of Humanities/Fine Arts/Social Sciences, Director of the School of Art, Dean of Mathematics and Science, and Dean of Distance Learning. Those asked to recommend were given an instrument we developed based on an analysis and synthesis of the literature focused upon the role of faculty with regard to student retention. They were instructed that they could recommend up to ten potential participants. We determined after receiving recommendations from all ten of those invited to submit recommendations that we would invite faculty members to participate if they were recommended by seven or more of the individuals. Based upon this requirement, nine faculty members were identified and invited to participate; all accepted the invitation and completed each stage

of the study: two individual interviews and one group interview with all faculty

participants and both researchers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants on each

campus with the first interview focused upon background characteristics such as

educational pathways, educational experiences, and professional aspirations; and the

second round focused on participants' specific approaches to and strategies for working

with community college students. Participants were also questioned about the ways in

which they conceived of their role as faculty members or peer mentors as well as the

benefits and challenges associated with working in a community college setting. Kim

Russell conducted all individual interviews with faculty members, and Kyle Barron

conducted all individual interviews with peer mentors. Audio from the interviews was

recorded and then transcribed using an electronic transcription service. The researchers

then compared the original recordings with written transcripts to ensure accuracy, and

transcripts were then corrected if errors were discovered.

Following each interview, the researchers composed a short memo to record

initial impressions and a brief, overall summary of each interview, and a physical file for

each participant held individual transcripts for each interview. In addition, transcripts

and summaries were electronically shared between the researchers. Independently, we

reviewed each transcript and generated initial open codes based upon criteria such as

repetition by individuals or repetition between individual interviews, relationship to

retention literature reviewed by researchers, and connections to Mattering theory and

Validation theory. We worked collaboratively to "debrief" each other's experiences and first impressions of the interviews and to unpack each iteration of our analysis.

By viewing faculty and peer mentors' work with community college students through the lens of Validation and Mattering Theories, we were able to interpret the information shared by the participants in the study by considering the ways in which the participants seek to influence student success by demonstrating to students that they can indeed be successful and that they matter to at least one person in the academic environment. Validation and Mattering theories, thus, provided a common context for interpreting the behaviors, approaches, attitudes, and strategies reported by the study participants; and we are able to conclude that, in some way, each of the participants in the study strives to contribute to students' sense of Validation and Mattering, whether or not the participants intentionally and explicitly seek to communicate those feelings to the students with whom they work.

Once we open coded each transcript and then reviewed, we met to make connections between the open codes, and those open codes considered both valid and important by both researchers were aggregated, creating axial codes that were more thematic in nature. For example, codes such as "assisting students with financial aid questions," "taking students to an office that can help them," "letting students know about counseling on campus," and "helping students learn to navigate the college website" were all combined (with other related open codes) to generate the axial code "connecting students to college resources." The axial codes were then used to again code each transcript, and interviewers worked together to generate a document in which

emergent themes were described. This document then served as the basis for discussion that took place in group meetings.

All participants were invited to participate in a group meeting/interview—one for faculty participants and one for peer mentors— attended by both researchers in order to discuss and review the document describing the emergent themes, which allowed for member checking of that data and coding of that data to take place.   Participants in both meetings were asked to provide any additional information or suggest revisions or clarifications to the initial findings. In both sessions, participants provided further examples related to the findings that were shared. Both group interviews lasted approximately two hours, with participants in both meetings supporting the findings that were shared with them, which helped researchers to feel more confident about their findings.

Role of Researchers

As each of us is an employee of the college we selected as the sites for our studies, it was important to the integrity of our work that we examined our roles within the institutions and our reasons for the selection of the two sites. Though we acknowledge that convenience played a role in our site selection process, we argue that the two sites we selected met our selection criteria in that both institutions offered subjects—faculty in one case and students in the other—who were part of a group that had demonstrated effectiveness. Because we wanted to learn about the people who represented a "best case" type of scenario, these two sites met our needs.

It is essential for us to have an understanding of the ways in which our positions and roles impact a number of aspects of our study. Knowing ourselves and acknowledging the factors that influence our own biases and expectations have allowed us to more clearly and objectively interpret our data and make meaning from it. For the sake of our audience, it was important that to make a genuine effort to describe our backgrounds and roles so that readers can further contextualize the information we share and hopefully develop enhanced confidence in the validity and trustworthiness of our work.

Kim Russell is a faculty member at West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) who has taught college-level English full-time for 13 years and served as the English Program Coordinator for 10 years. A third-generation community college graduate, she began planning to teach English on the community college level during her junior year in high school. In 2014 she became the chair of Professional and Organizational Development at WKCTC, and in that capacity she became the leader of the team of faculty who are responsible for the New Faculty Orientation program at WKCTC. She also coordinates all campus professional development activities and programs for both faculty and staff. She is passionate about teaching, faculty development, and the power of community colleges to make a difference to the lives of individuals as well as to communities and the nation as a whole.

Kyle Barron, who served at the time of the study as the Director of Student Life and Engagement at SKYCTC is also a community college graduate who has a passion for the community college as an institution. Kyle worked in student affairs at a Texas Community College for several years before moving to Kentucky to accept his position at

SKYCTC. He helped to develop, organize, and supervise a peer mentoring program at the Texas community college; and he was asked to develop a similar program when he came to SKYCTC. He spent over four years handling all aspects of the Student Ambassador Program at SKYCTC, including structuring, budgeting, hiring, training, assessing, recruiting, and marketing. Kyle's passion for student development and student affairs have determined his career path, and he believes that by developing and maintaining collaborations between academic affairs and student affairs, institutions can serve their students most effectively.

As we embarked our research project, there were several ethical questions and other issues to consider, and perhaps the most important one is to be able to understand ourselves as researchers. We needed to consider how our own experiences and beliefs shape the way we perceive what we saw and heard.   In addition, we needed to accept that our positions at our respective institutions could have some impact on the information that our participants chose to share with us. Also, because we conducted "backyard" research, we needed to be careful not to let any preconceived notions about these human subjects affect our data collection and ability to listen and observe carefully. Both in the interviews and in the reporting of data, it was important not to project ourselves on the participants. By both researchers independently coding all data sets and then comparing codes and findings, we feel that we were able to have a perspective on the data that was not influenced by either personal relationships with the participants or prior knowledge of the participants.

We also realized that it would be important to assure participants that the information they shared would not be specifically linked to them, and their identities

would be protected. Discussing the need for our participants to be both candid and honest, we discussed specific ways we could encourage participants to feel comfortable being "real" with us. With that in mind, we determined that our demeanor in the interviews needed to be relatively informal. We would also be very mindful of ever appearing judgmental or disdainful if participants shared information we did not necessarily agree with or enjoy. In fact, we discussed the need to share our own weaknesses and challenges with participants in order to encourage them to share freely. Though we can never truly know if our positions within these institutions impacted the way in which participants shared information with us, we can say that we intentionally developed interview strategies that would encourage participants to be themselves and to know that what they shared would not be linked to them.

We feel that the information participants shared during their interviews indicates that participants were comfortable being both candid and open with the researchers. Participants often shared details about their pasts, particularly related to past academic failures or poor decision making in their personal lives, which demonstrated their trust in the researchers. Further, we believe that by providing participants with a detailed background of the study and its purposes, we were able to communicate to participants the value of the study. Perhaps because all of the participants have demonstrated through their work that student success is important to their work, the participants understood the need for the data to be reliable and accurate.

Several procedures and practices were structured to allow us to maintain the ethical integrity of the study. First, we allowed other parties to identify the participants within the parameters of the research design. Also, the criteria used to identify the

participants was based upon a review of literature completed by both researchers and could, therefore, be used to identify participants in any community college, not just the two with which we are affiliated. Working as a team we provided support and an internal "audit" for one another's subjectivity. Finally, by involving participants in activities designed to serve as "member checking," we further ensured our data was accurately represented and communicated.

It is unrealistic to expect that researchers come to a project with a completely blank slate. It is also undesirable that a researcher is a completely blank slate, as his or her previous experiences and knowledge about the topic can serve to enrich the researcher's understanding of the data. However, what is essential is that researchers acknowledge these factors to themselves as well as to their audiences and subjects, and ethical researchers demonstrate how their ethics helped to shape the design process in order for the work to meet the standards of quality research.

Findings

After analyzing our coded data using Matter and Validation Theories as our lens for contextualizing the information we collected from our participants, we discovered four common themes that emerged from our conversations with faculty members and peer mentors:

1. Both faculty members and peer mentors shared a sense of responsibility that drove them to want to help others and a sense of satisfaction from feeling that their help made a difference in the lives of another person.

2. Both faculty members and peer mentors were committed to approaching their duties in professional ways, perhaps motivated to maintain their professional standards by a desire to help others most effectively.

3. Every participant in the study understood the importance of building positive working relationships with students, though not all participants used the same strategies for building such relationships, and the relationships built most likely varied depending upon the faculty member's or peer mentor's attitudes and personal characteristics. However, all participants expressed the importance of specific attributes in a good relationship with one's students or mentees: trust, respect, understanding, and concern.

4. A belief in the importance of and a commitment to being informed regarding campus (and, in some cases, community) resources that could benefit students and assist them in meeting the needs that could potentially impact their academic persistence as well as a desire and effort to connect students with such resources was a final characteristic shared by both faculty members and peer mentors in the study.

Theme One: A Sense of Responsibility to Help Others

Perhaps the most foundational characteristic we discovered among the participants was sense of personal responsibility to help others. The participants as a whole shared that they care about helping others to achieve their goals and, as a result, improve their quality of life. Each one felt he or she could play a role in providing the

support or assistance that could help rather than hinder students on their academic journey. Though there were differences among the participants in the ways in which they approached their goal of helping students, all of the participants communicated a sense of personal responsibility for helping students, a desire for being a positive force in their academic lives, and a sense of professional and sometimes personal satisfaction resulting from helping others.

In the interviews with the faculty members, each of the participants pointed out specific ways in which they dedicated their efforts to help students be successful, whether through providing support in the specific academic discipline they teach or assisting students in other aspects related to their academic performance. Faculty members who teach courses that are considered particularly challenging or high stakes for students, in particular, demonstrated their passion for helping students by providing examples of how they aid students in successfully mastering course content and completing course requirements.

For example, Tasha, who primarily teaches anatomy and physiology—an established gatekeeper course that serves as the primary prerequisite course for acceptance into competitive selective admission allied health and nursing programs— shared that she sees her role as "the person who stands between students and their goal acceptance into a program that will allow them to earn a wage that will improve quality of life." Tasha acknowledged that people consider her course a "weed out" course that is extremely challenging for most students, requiring a significant time commitment on the part of the students, many of whom juggle a number of life roles and external responsibilities. Therefore, with the goal of helping these students to learn the content

and earn the grades they need to earn in order to be admitted into selective admission programs, Tasha takes a number of steps. She has invested a great deal of her time in learning to use various software programs that she integrates in her courses that provide students with extra support in learning the material. She also dedicates several hours each week meeting with students in small, non-required study groups in which she reviews course materials and provides assistance with study skills. Tasha also dedicates time outside of class meetings and office hours to creating practice examinations for both the lecture and lab components of the classroom, explaining that she sets up the exams and invites students to participate in the practice examinations in order to be better prepared for the format and content of the exams and to reduce students' test anxiety, a problem that she has observed among many of her students.

Similar to Tasha, Jake also teaches a course which typically has a pass rate below 70% and serves as an intimidating gatekeeper course for students: college algebra. This course, which is required for many transfer students as well as students working toward admission in many selective admission technical programs, is often "feared and dreaded" by students, according to Jake. Like Tasha, Jake's passion for helping students be successful in his course is demonstrated in a variety of ways. First, Jake focuses a great deal of his effort on issues related to math curriculum, serving as chair of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System's Math Curriculum Committee. He explained, "My job is to make sure that none of our decisions hurt students." With this goal in mind, Jake has been the principal force in developing a system of "math pathways" that will more specifically prepare students for their intended discipline, rather than requiring them to struggle through courses that they might not actually need for their

majors. In spite of the time that this project entailed, Jake reported that he felt a deep sense of responsibility to current and future students, observing, "These math pathways may be the single biggest thing I'll do in my career to help students be successful. I can't think of anything else I could ever do that has a better chance to positively impact more lives."

In his own classes, Jake also strives to help students successfully learn the content and complete the course requirements. He explained that perhaps one of the most important ways in which he helps students is by understanding the typical challenges faced by community college students, challenges which may impact their attendance in this classes, and then developing his course policies and procedures based upon this understanding. Therefore, he posts all lecture notes, handouts, and practice assignments or quizzes on his class's Blackboard page so that students always have access to any material they may have missed in class. Additionally, he understands that many of his students have had negative experiences in math classes before coming to his class, and many have a fear of math class and a sense of dread about having to take the course. "From the first day of class I try to disarm them and let them know that I am there to help them to succeed.   I tell them that I believe they can all do the work, and I remind them throughout the semester that I am available when they want help. They can call me, email me, or come to my office; I'll drop whatever I'm doing to work with them," Jake explained.

Though all faculty members in the study indicated ways in which they work to help students be successful in mastering the content taught in their classes, several faculty members also shared ways in which the seek to help students in other areas. Karen, a

foreign language teacher and sponsor of the college's Multi-Cultural Club, sees herself as a mentor for the college's Hispanic and international student populations. She explained that she works to help these students feel more comfortable with and integrated into both the social and academic aspects of college life. Karen shared that she provides to students (Hispanic students in particular) opportunities where they can speak their native language, share stories of home, talk about homesickness, and meet other students with whom they can form common bonds. Speaking about her approach to helping students, both in and out of her classroom, Karen noted, "My strength on this campus is about much more than my discipline. I've always felt I can offer a listening ear and maybe some perspective for them that can help them on their journey."

Like Karen, Eliza is also passionate about helping students to have a successful academic journey. As the coordinator of the college's First Year Experience (FYE) program and the lead teacher for the FYE 105 course required of all transfer students, Eliza believes that she can help students in meaningful ways that can impact their overall success as students. From helping students to build peer networks in the courses she teaches to working very closely with all of her students to provide each one with individualized academic advising, Eliza shared that she feels a deep sense of both professional and personal satisfaction when she is able to make a difference in the lives of her students. While she is passionate about helping students to determine their career pathways, she is equally passionate about sharing other knowledge and skills with her students that will help them to be successful both in her classroom and outside of it. She discussed how she requires students to engage in individual conferences with her because she wants to help them develop their ability to communicate with faculty members, and

she hopes to build their confidence in their ability to engage with faculty and other authority figures.

Professionalism

The sense of personal and professional responsibility that the faculty and peer mentors described is possibly one of the main driving forces in a set of behaviors and attitudes that we characterized as "professionalism". Each of the faculty members and peer mentors in the study described a commitment to what we defined as "professionalism," a term which served as an umbrella for numerous behaviors, practices, and attitudes described by participants. That "professionalism" took many forms, both among faculty participants and peer mentor participants, but the common thread woven throughout the profiles of each person in the study was that each one took very seriously his or her job in working with students. Each one shared a belief that he or she could play an important role in helping another person succeed at college, and therefore, approached his or her job in what would be considered a professional way.

For faculty members, professionalism manifested itself in a number of ways. For Laura, for example, professionalism is what drives her every action and decision as a faculty member. It is her sense of professional responsibility that drives her to continually "re-tool" as a teacher, attending discipline-related and teaching-focused conferences each year. She also spoke of the professional image she seeks to cultivate, never socializing with students or engaging with them on social media, for example. Believing that she best serves her students by serving as an example of professionalism, she intentionally dedicates herself to modeling her definition of a professional: a person

who continually strives for excellence in her career and takes a great deal of pride in the work that represents her. To Laura, this professionalism means everything from arriving early to class, to carefully proofreading all documents and communications, to "dressing the part," and to learning new skills and content that can keep the class both fresh and timely.

Several faculty members discussed that a key aspect of professionalism for them was the belief that their work speaks for them and, therefore, must be of excellent quality. Adam provided the example of his syllabi for his courses as a way in which the documents he provides to students serving as a reflection of his professionalism. Adding that he believes these documents can encourage his students to trust in his professionalism and dedication to his work, Adam explained that he very carefully reviews and updates his syllabi and continually evaluates the content of his syllabi to ensure that the policies and assignments continue to line up with his teaching philosophy as well as current practices in his discipline. Discussing the potential impact of errors or outdated information in his syllabus, Adam described his belief that carefully developing documents for students was as important aspect of professionalism for him:

I see syllabi from colleagues sometimes that have the wrong semester at the top of the document. Or they have the wrong dates in the schedule of assignments and due dates. Sometimes syllabi have a typo or a spelling or grammatical error. My concern when I see these things is that I don't know how we can ask students to give us their very best if we don't truly give them ours. Many of my students are business majors, and we talk often about how we cultivate a professional image. How can they respect that lesson and take it to heart if my work is sloppy? And

what message am I sending about how much I value them if they aren't even worth the time it takes to review a document? How could I deduct for such errors in their papers and projects if the written directions I gave them for the project are full of mistakes?

Like Adam, Jake's sense of professionalism is reflected in his approach to delivering high-quality materials to his students. In his case, Jake invests a significant amount of time creating what he feels are the best materials that will enable students to master his content. Jake shared that, after reviewing a number of software and textbook options for his college algebra students, he decided that none of them met his standards, and all were cost prohibitive for his students. He, therefore, decided to build his own program that would allow him to create materials for students and develop a content collection that would meet students' needs and be free of charge to his students. Explaining that upon completing all of the program, he then spent months testing the accuracy and functionality of the program because he considered the program a reflection of his professionalism, and he did not want students to encounter difficulties or observe errors because he feared that would undermine his image as a professional who takes pride in his work and wants to be his best for his students.

For each of the faculty members of the study, professionalism meant different things. For some, professionalism meant wearing a tie or pantsuit to class each day, while others felt that they were able to demonstrate professionalism wearing jeans or other casual attire to teach their classes. In other cases, professionalism meant a less casual approach to interactions with students and a clear reminder of the distinctions between a student role and a teacher role; however, others were comfortable being on a

first-name basis with students and having a snack with students in the school's café. Where all the faculty members agreed, however, is the role professionalism plays in their commitment to do their best work as a faculty member. In other words, whether they chose to attend academic conferences, read professional publications regularly, receive training in educational technologies, or take classes related to their field of study; each of these faculty members articulated that professionalism means continual improvement and growth along with a commitment to lifelong learning. Also, these faculty members expressed that an important aspect of their sense of professionalism is their dedication to student success, which is manifested in a reflective and often recursive approach to structuring curriculum, assessments, or class activities in ways that best serve students.

Similarly, the peer mentors identified professionalism as a key character trait possessed by all who were identified as a successful human lever of retention. In comparison to the faculty members, the peer mentor's take on professionalism looks somewhat different. They did not show up to work in a suit, though they did take pride in their appearance and their standardized uniform. Peer mentors described a number of behaviors they felt were important for a successful peer mentor to have: being organized, arriving early or on time to job and school related activities, taking responsibility to learn new things in order to be able to better serve clients, presenting oneself in a respectful and pleasant manner, serving as a role model, and projecting a positive image for the institution as well as the peer mentor program.

One peer mentor, Aza, focused on being professional within the classroom. For Aza, his studies were a true reflection to his mentees on how he was as a student and why other students should see him as someone who can help them in their studies.

I take on the personal responsibility of making sure that I go to class at every opportunity that I can. I don't like to miss classes, and I make sure that I complete any homework or extra credit opportunity that's presented to me. I feel like my responsibility as a student is to put forth my best effort, always, and take as much knowledge from my instructors as possible in the course work that they provide and to strive for good grades.

Aza would go even further in showing his dedication and professionalism, stating on multiple occasions that he chose to engage in further research outside of the provided materials to ensure that he fully understood the course.

Julia noted how she had grown immensely as a professional in the role as a peer mentor. She also noted how it translated into her own personal successes and those of her students as they watched her continue to grow. She shared that the way in which she carried herself and greeted a person had changed substantially. Also, the role as a peer mentor allowed her to enhance her ability multi-task and still perform at a high level, according to Julia. She learned how to take more seriously her time management skills, even though she stated she had the skills before the job, but still her job as a peer mentor encouraged her to develop them more.

Rachel noted that her professionalism and communication also improved while she was in the roll of a peer mentor. To some extent this is a direct representation of many of the peer mentors having this role as one of their first jobs. However, the attention to the intentional growth in professionalism resulted in her mentees being able to learn more and grow alongside her. Rachel's acknowledgement that she grew

substantially in this area while in the role speaks to her dedication to being a professional and focusing on continual learning and growth.

Overall, the peer mentors expressed an acknowledgement for the professionalism that was necessary for the role and developed throughout their experience in being a human lever of retention.

Relationship Building

The relationships students build and maintain in the community college environment can have a significant impact on students' academic experiences and can potentially mean the difference between course and credential completion versus attrition or academic failure. Faculty, as the main source of social and academic interaction for many community college students, can play an essential role in student success by seeking to build relationships with students that will enable students to feel both a sense of validation as well as a sense of mattering to the institution. In addition, relationships with peer mentors characterized by empathy, respect, and trust have been shown to positively impact student academic success and retention from semester to semester (Plasket et al., 2018).

Often the perception of "building relationships with students," for some faculty members, carries with it the notion that faculty members who "build relationships" do so by getting to know personal details about students, engaging in long sometimes emotional conversations with students, or developing "friendly" rather than "professional" interactions with students. However, what we discovered in this study is that the faculty participants strive to build relationships with students that will encourage

student success. And while several of the faculty members in the study do work to make connections with students by learning about who they are as people and spending time engaging in conversations both in and out of class, not all of the faculty members in the study felt either comfortable or interested in taking part in these kinds of interactions with students.

Ultimately, though, the faculty members and peer mentors in the study, regardless of how they individually went about connecting with their students and building relationships with them, found ways to create relationships that were built upon certain common foundational principles that are present in most any functional relationship. The faculty members and peer mentors sought to establish trust from the students and hoped to demonstrate that they care about the welfare of each student. They worked to establish fair, compassionate standards and endeavored to choose words and actions that communicated a sense of respect for students.

Certainly, several of the faculty participants shared their feelings about the importance of building relationships with students, with faculty members such as Adam, Eliza, and Katie expressing that this aspect of their work with students is perhaps the most important thing they do because it allows them to better serve the students with whom they work if they know and are known by their students. Adam explained that by prioritizing relationship building from the first day of class, he is able to connect with students, begin to build their trust in him, and let them know that he is invested in each of them as individual students and as people. He has several different strategies for building relationships with students, including a questionnaire activity that students do on day one that allows him to know more about who they are and what their goals are. This

document also encourages students to ask questions about the college, and he addresses each of those questions by the second class meeting. In addition, Adam learns the names of each of his students, sometimes more than 120 students per semester, by the second day of class by taking a photograph of the full classroom on the first day and then matching names to faces and studying the names and faces until he knows each one.

The strategy he considers one of his most effective for connecting with students is a series of required office visits that all of his students must do throughout the semester, with the first visit taking place in the first two weeks of the semester, and the two later visits taking place around midterm and then in the weeks leading up to final exams. Summing up his motivation for dedicating so much time to relationship building, Adam expressed, "Lots of our students are day-to-day or week-to-week, and it doesn't take much for some of them to give up. If they know that there is at least one person at school who believes in them, stands up for them, and cares about them; that might be the difference between walking out the door and crossing the stage in May."

Similar to Adam, Eliza requires office visits with her students during which she works with students to define their academic and professional goals and then plan for future semesters. As a teacher in the First Year Experience (FYE) courses, Eliza believes she has the opportunity to help her students, particularly those who are undecided in regard to a major, to make sound decisions regarding their academic and career pathways. She also believes that she can use her knowledge of campus and community resources to help students who experience common barriers that can potentially derail their academic pursuits, issues such as financial problems, domestic abuse, unreliable childcare, or mental health problems. Eliza explains, however, that without having a

personal connection with a student, she cannot hope to see a need and then work to meet that need.

Anatomy and physiology professor Katie shares Adam and Eliza's philosophy about the importance of making personal connections to students. A high school valedictorian who wanted to drop out after her first semester of college, Katie reported,

If I had made even one connection with a faculty member or felt like even one of them cared whether I lived or died, I might have been a little more eager to come back. But that's not how it was. Fortunately, my dad, who was a college graduate and a teacher, insisted I go back. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here right now.

Katie, however, believes that many community college students do not have someone at home who will make them go back after a rough semester or even a rough week. She described one of her strategies for communicating to them that she cares for each of them, explaining her approach to inspiring and motivating students, particularly after the first test in her course, a test that many of the students do not pass. One of her "motivational speeches" involves showing students a video about "Faith, the two-legged dog," demonstrating to students that it is possible to overcome challenges with a bit of courage, persistence, and positivity. "I tell them, 'Look, if a little dog can keep going even when it's really hard, then you definitely can!'"

Katie also sets aside time to meet with students individually and in groups, encouraging the students to form small "study pods" that she meets with several times a semester in order to help them in small-group settings. According to Katie, one of the biggest advantages that community college faculty members have over faculty who teach

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for larger institutions and often teach very large classes is that, "We can know our students and connect with them so that they know we really do care about them. We can learn who they are and what they want to do with their lives, and we can better meet their needs and communicate with them when we do that," Katie suggested.

Not all of the faculty participants, though, shared the same philosophies of or approaches to relationship building. Three of the nine participants reported that they, unlike many of their colleagues, were not the "touchy-feely" type of faculty member. In fact, two of the faculty participants expressed surprise that they were included in the study because they did not consider themselves "touchy-feely" enough with the students. The question, then, that presents itself is, what does relationship building between faculty and students look like when those relationships do not consist of the "typical" interactions that can come to minds of faculty members when considering this issue?

Laura, a psychology professor, reported that she does not feel comfortable engaging in what she considers "personal" conversations with students, particularly if those conversations are not specifically related to course content. Describing a recent interaction with a pregnant student, Laura noted that she would never feel comfortable asking the student how the pregnancy is going or what the baby's nursery was going to look like. However, she did encourage the student to please communicate with her in order to make plans for an upcoming exam that was scheduled very close to the baby's due date. Laura, who considers "professionalism" her top priority as a faculty member, believes that it is essential to have a clear boundary between students and faculty members, a line that can be crossed when faculty members engage personally with students. What, then, does Laura's relationship look like with her students?

Laura shared that she feels the best way she can serve her students is by teaching them, in the context of her content, useful and transferrable skills that will help them throughout their academic career and will help to prepare them for professional success. Intentionally teaching listening skills, organizational strategies, and lessons about professionalism, Laura hopes to show students that she cares about their futures beyond her class. Providing an example of one of the strategies she uses in her classes, Laura described the way that she teaches her students to use the Cornell notes structure to organize their information and prepare for an exam. When asked why she takes class time for this kind of instruction in study skills, Laura answered, "I just want to give them that extra edge, so that when they go on to a different class or a different institution, they *know* they can succeed. I try to give them lots of opportunities to do different things so that they will believe in themselves and know that they can be successful."

Jake, like Laura, would not describe himself as a "touchy-feely" faculty member. Yet he too engages in behaviors with his students that help to build a relationship that communicates to students that they matter and that they can be successful. Though he readily admits that he does not always know the names of all of his students, and he rarely engages in conversations unrelated to course content with students; Jake uses his strengths as a faculty member to attempt to build a sense of trust and respect with his students. "My hope," Jake articulated, "is that they will always know that they come first with me." To communicate this belief to his students, he described the way in which he makes sure to always be "present" when his student talk to him, always putting aside anything else that he is working on in order to give his full attention to students. He also

shared how he feels his class policies communicate to students that he cares about their welfare, understands the challenges some of them face, and will treat them with fairness.

Jake described the anxiety he observes in a large number of his math students, particularly those students in college algebra, which is a dreaded graduation requirement for many students. Though Jake does not know how many pets his students have or even necessarily what their chosen field of student is, he does understand the fear many of them have, and he feels a sense of responsibility to help students have a positive experience in a math class. In an attempt to communicate to students that he cares about their success and understands their fears related to math is through his practice exam policy, Jake creates a practice examination for every test to help reduce students' test anxiety and prepare students to be successful on the exam. Jake spelled out his practice exam approach:

> It looks exactly like the real exam that they will take the next class period. It has the same kinds of questions and even the same number of questions they will have on the real test. It lets them know exactly what kinds of material will be covered. The students work through the exam, and then we take a few moments to go over their questions. They are also encouraged to come by my office and ask questions and work through the problems if they need more help. Many of them let me know that this really helps them.

What is clear in all of these examples is that the faculty participants understand that they must connect with their students if they want to be truly effective in their faculty position. Though these faculty members did not explicitly describe their approach to

relationship building as a strategy to communicate a sense of mattering and validation to their students, example after example demonstrate that their relationships with students are, in fact, intended to convey those very ideas to students. In addition, while some of the faculty members in the study do indeed fit the description of a "touchy-feely" faculty member who intentionally seeks to get to know students and work closely with each one; others in the study occupied various points on the continuum between deeply connected to individual students and quite distant from individual students, with some choosing to be professionally approachable and caring but not personally involved. No matter where in the continuum a faculty fell, however, the unifying characteristic is that all faculty members used their strengths to demonstrate a desire for student success, knowledge and understanding of students' academic challenges, and a commitment to helping students succeed.

Similarly, peer mentors seek to build relationships with all their student mentees from day one. Where the peer mentor differs from the faculty member, though, is noticeable from the very first meeting that they have with their mentees. While some faculty may be hesitant to develop a personal relationship with their students and know about their lives outside of the college, this is the first thing that the peer mentor seeks to accomplish. By learning about the new student's personal life, the peer mentors feel that they can better assist the student in developing a sense of belonging at the college. For example, if from their initial conversation they learn that their mentee is a fan of gaming and host a weekly *Dungeons and Dragons* session at their house, they then are able to help connect that student to a student club on campus that will hopefully provide them

more of a sense of belonging on campus than even the peer mentor alone can provide, more to come on how they connect their students to the campus.

If the peer mentor does not learn about the student's personal support systems, motivations, and hobbies, then it is very difficult for the peer mentor to connect to their students and the participants noted that the odds of the student continuing to participate in the optional program decrease substantially. The participants even noted taking the lead on moving the conversations beyond merely conversations and into a form of relationship building by first letting the student mentee know what their hobbies, home situation, and successes and failures at the college level have been. They reported being very intentional about this in an effort to help make the student feel more comfortable to share in return and thus enter into more of a relationship than merely a provided resource of the college. While all of the peer mentors discussed how they took this approach, four of the ambassadors shared more noteworthy examples.

Trenton, a peer mentor and vocational student who did not get a chance to meet with many of his mentees outside of the classroom because many of them were already employed and would go straight from their car to class and return to their car to drive to work, had to get creative in how he got meetings with his mentees. Many of his first meetings occurred in the classroom or during their lunch break that many of these programs take on a daily basis. For him, he was able to impress upon the students how much he cared for their success and he stressed the importance of being able to develop a relationship with his students that was based on something other than academics, otherwise he noted that they had no interest in meeting again.

When Trenton was asked what qualities make him an excellent human lever of retention he focused on the ability to build relationships with his mentees. He viewed his ability to develop relationships with his mentees as a skill set that he not only grew but helped his mentees develop and grow, stating:

> I think by ultimately building the relationship if the student has a relationship with their mentor that's really strong, it's going to branch out into the school, the instructors and hopefully maybe plant the seed with them to where they can [build relationships with others]. They'll go out and they don't even have to be a student ambassador, by title. This is another student that sees another new student coming in that maybe they're struggling or something and they can step in and be like, well, let me tell you what I can to help you out.

His approach to developing relationships with students was based on the hope that not only would they develop a relationship with him but also with their peers.

Julia had a shared goal of developing relationships with her mentees as she sought to be their support system. She noted that while the role of faculty on campus is undeniable with regard to academics, the perspective of the peer mentor is not necessarily better but more "fresh". The peer mentor is able to "speak into the life of" her mentee from the perspective of one who just went through, or maybe even is currently going through, the same situation as their mentee. Further, she viewed how she went about creating relationships with her mentees, those same students who were high achieving human levers or retention were also trying to develop a relationship with, was always for the greater good of the student. She believes that the differences in perspective helped

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make the whole, and provided the student with a greater sense of belonging at the college from all different angles. The work of the peer mentor and the faculty member together truly made a big impact for her and she sought to do the same with her mentees.

Ashley worked to become friends with her mentees and help with their classes as well as with other tasks and challenges. She related her personal experiences in college and reported how her transition was easier because she no longer felt like she had to go at her studies alone, as she did in high school. In college, there was not competition for different rankings within the classes, and she was able to come alongside her peers and work together for their joint educations. She sought to instill this in her students that she mentored too. When she would explain to her students why it was important for them to develop relationships, she wanted them to know that they were not alone and they could turn to her for just about anything. She relished the opportunity to "just to talk" or "being there and pushing (them) along and helping (them) through it."

Due to her ability to build relationships with her mentees, Ashley was able to provide key support to one of her mentees, a man in his sixties whose technology related skills Ashley described as "non-existent." At first, Ashley, being only 17 when she started the job as a peer mentor, was unsure that she would be able to connect with her new mentee, but once they were able to form a relationship, thanks in part to her constant "just being there for them" and "helping them through it", she was able to help that student get to a point where he was comfortable with computers and in his abilities to be a successful college student. That student came back semester after semester until Ashley graduated and they still stay in touch periodically. Her ability to focus on relationship

building allowed her to break through to a student that otherwise likely would not have succeeded without her help.

Bill is another peer mentor who stressed the importance of relationship building as it related to how he was a successful human lever of retention. Bill recounted multiples instances in which he would find himself mentoring a student while he was "off the clock," but this was not important to him. Rather, what was important was that he was able to help the student and that his mentors had developed a relationship with him in which they felt they could come to him at any time and seek his guidance and advice. Bill focused on how peer mentors can be a moral support: "We can be there to just listen to, we can be just an ear or a shoulder to cry on." He cared deeply about being part of his mentees' support system he saw how successful it was in his role as a mentor.

Further, Bill stated that the one thing he wished he was better at was building relationships with all different types of students. He expressed that he would like to be able to relate to every student, giving the example of the single mothers whom he assisted. He struggled to identify how to connect with all of his students, though his acknowledgement of this and desire to improve on this area of his job above all else speaks to how valuable he perceived the role of relationship building in creating a sense of belonging for the student at the college. He was not the only peer mentor to articulate this recognition as relationship building being both vital to the success of the student and also one of the areas for improvement for the individuals that were high achieving human levers of success, consistently striving to better themselves to help more students.

Facilitating Connections to Resources

Community college students often bring with them to college a variety of life roles and personal challenges that complicate their academic journey. Whether those challenges are financial, intellectual, emotional, or a combination thereof; faculty members and peer mentors are often in the best position to help students connect with the resources that will provide them the support that can allow them to better navigate through challenges and overcome difficult circumstances that could potentially threaten their chances at success. As faculty members and peer mentors work closely with students and typically have more access to students than any other constituency on a campus, they may be the only group on campus who has the power to make students aware of important resources that are available to them.

Connecting students to helpful resources seems a natural extension of the characteristics demonstrated by the faculty members and peer mentors in the study. As we have established, both faculty members and peer mentors are committed to helping others and engaged in building relationships with their students. Therefore, connecting students to resources that can make a positive difference in their lives both on and off campus would be a logical action for such faculty members and peer mentors.

Community colleges often offer a variety of services and resources that can meet many different sorts of students' needs. From food pantries to free tutoring and childcare financial assistance to career counseling services; many campuses have numerous programs, personnel, and funding to assist students. The problem? Often students are unaware of the existence or availability of such resources, or they have absolutely no idea how to take advantage of them. Further, when a student is the only member of his family to attend college or even step foot on a college campus, it is understandable that such a

student would be quite unfamiliar with the services that are typically available for students. And while orientation programs may expose students to these resources, often students are not able to recall such information when a need arises because they were overwhelmed with all the information presented in an orientation, a problem that Eliza often observes in her FYE courses.

"Nobody ever told me about work study. I didn't know there were grants that could help me pay for school. I once *paid* for the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)! I didn't know how to get tutoring or talk to a career counselor. So these kinds of things are what I wish I had known about when I was an undergraduate," Eliza pointed out. A member of the board for the local United Way, Eliza took the position so that she could learn more about agencies in the community who might be able to help her students and meet needs they have that threaten their ability to be successful in classes. "I know they get tired of hearing about this stuff, and they probably think I'm nuts when I actually escort them different places on campus, but I really believe in the importance of knowing about what resources are available and taking advantage of them," Eliza explained.

John too believes in the importance of knowing a campus and what it has to offer. A club sponsor who considers himself to be active in "student life" initiatives, John makes sure to let his math students know about different student organizations, leadership opportunities, and ways that they can serve the campus and community. Helping students connect with activities outside the classroom is one of John's passions because, according to John, "Students need a space, a place where they can come together and feel like a family. They need to be able to ask questions of each other and not feel silly. If

they can connect with others, then when sometime goes badly or they are struggling, I think they're less likely to quit." He also thinks that student activities can give all students an opportunity to distinguish themselves, build confidence, and develop leadership abilities that will serve them well in the future.

Each of the faculty participants in the study provided at least one example of helping to connect students with campus resources. From reminding students of upcoming registration dates and encouraging students to meet with their academic advisors to helping students connect with staff in the financial aid office, the faculty members demonstrated a knowledge of available resources and a desire to help students take advantage of those resources. Two faculty members remarked that they invite representatives from the Academic Support Center (free student tutoring service) and TRiO (Student Support Services) to deliver quick presentations in their classes in order to get students exposed to the services and hopefully connect with at least one person from those offices. Half of the faculty participants reported that they had written an application for a student to receive emergency funding from the college's student emergency fund for a need such as emergency housing or transportation expenses. Nearly all of the participants shared that they had written a referral for mental health counseling for a student, which is another free resource available to students of the college. When asked how they themselves were aware of such services and how to take advantage of them, the faculty members explained that they had attending training sessions and formal meetings about different campus resources. Many had also sought out information on using certain resources by exploring the college's website or simply visiting offices themselves and asking questions.

Pamela, one of the peer mentors who was returning to college later in life, was especially intent on serving in the role of "connector to the resources available" for her students. Being a mother of two young children, Pamela had a personal knowledge base of the resources that were available and necessary to allow students like herself to be successful. Unfortunately, this was not the case the first time she came to college 15 years prior. Her first attempt was not a successful one, and she went on to credit resources as a large reason she was successful this time. Her number one priority in her role as a peer mentor was, "trying to make sure that all my mentees have gotten all the resources they need." She viewed connecting her students to the resources as providing for that which she did not have her first time around.

Bill also saw his role as connecting students to resources as one that was of the utmost importance. While many of the resources would fall into the category of student services, Bill, much like John the faculty member, believed strongly in the opportunity for campus life to connect students to the college and create a sense of belonging at the institution that allowed the student to flourish and be retained semester to semester. Bill would try to conclude every meeting he had with students by letting them know of a campus club that he thought either matched what they were seeking in a degree or aligned well with their hobbies. Bill was also an officer for three clubs on campus and attended many more on a less frequent basis. Bill stated that he would try to invite his mentees to attend a Movie Club viewing or Student Government Association meeting and that he would join them because he was going there too. He noted that the personal invitation had a large amount of success as the Movie Club, for which he was president,

had the largest participation of any club on campus, and many of the members started as mentees of his or were one of the mentee's friends.

Implications

Traditionally community college students as a group face a number of challenges that are less common in their counterparts enrolled in four-year institutions. These students are often first-generation college students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are academically underprepared for college-level work. Besides their academic commitments, they often have numerous responsibilities: a full-time job, children or other dependents, or a home. The more affordable, open access institution is frequently the only opportunity for a student to pursue post-secondary education. However, put simply, several circumstances come together to make the average community college student of today vulnerable to failure. The challenges faced by today's typical community college student are often cited as a significant reason that such a low percentage of those who enroll in community college actually emerge with a credential or even continue beyond their first semester or academic year.

To provide students the support that will help them to persist toward graduation and/or transfer, community colleges must understand the resources they have and then leverage those resources in a way that will allow institutions to better serve students. Community college faculty members and peer mentors have the potential to be among the most influential forces in a community college student's academic life. Because their actions can help to instill a sense of both mattering and validation in the students with whom they encounter, faculty members and peer mentors should be both selected and

trained by institutions based upon the characteristics, philosophies, knowledge, and behaviors that help these groups to encourage persistence among the students they serve.

In our study of faculty members and peer mentors, we hoped to uncover characteristics and behaviors that the participants had in common in order to better understand the experience of being what we called "a human lever of retention," meaning basically a mechanism or resource that the institution can harness in order to influence student persistence. As practitioners who work in faculty and student development, our hope was that by learning from those who had been identified as "human levers," we could then apply that knowledge to our work with faculty members and peer mentors in the community college setting.

When comparing the data from the faculty participants and the peer mentor participants, several common themes/characteristics emerged: a passion for helping others, efforts dedicated to building relationships with students, a desire to connect students with resources that could help meet both academic and non-academic needs, and a commitment to values associated with professionalism. We propose that institutions should consider these themes both when making hiring decisions and when orienting or providing ongoing professional development to faculty members and peer mentors who are employed by the institution.

The Hiring Process

Because each of the four common themes can related to an individual's personal and/or professional sense of ethics and values, we suggest that institutions develop prompts and questions in both the application and interview process that will allow them

to discover if a candidate displays ethics and values that are consistent with those shared by faculty and peer mentors who serve as "human levers of retention."

Applications, for example, could include questions related to helping others and building relationships. Candidates could be given written prompts on an application that could ask them to provide examples of ways in which they have helped and supported others in their personal or professional lives. Additional documents could provide insight into a candidate's values and behaviors related to the support of student persistence. For example, individuals and search committees could review and analyze a candidate's vita or resume to look for ways in which that document might indicate that the candidate possesses the qualities of a "human lever." A candidate might, for instance, belong to an organization in the community that provides help or support for others, or the candidate might indicate that he or she does volunteer work. This information could serve to inform the reviewer that the candidate dedicates his or her time to helping others and/or understands the importance of resources and the power of certain resources to make a positive difference in the lives of people.

In addition, search committees and others involved in the hiring process could analyze letters of reference provided by candidates for ways in which the letters reflect the traits and behaviors that are common in faculty and peer mentor "human levers." For example, when reviewing a reference, one could look for key ideas related to a candidate's commitment to helping others or building relationships. Finally, individuals or search committees seeking to hire new faculty members or peer mentors could prepare specific topics for conversations with a candidate's references, and such topics could help

to provide a picture of a candidate's sense of professionalism or ability to build relationships with students.

Prior to interviews with prospective employees, interviewers can develop a bank of questions that will allow them to get a better sense of the way that a candidate does or does not match up with the criteria that have been linked with being a potential "human lever." Candidates, for instance, might be asked to describe an instance in which they helped another individual to be successful. Or, to better understand a candidate's interest in and ability to build relationships with students, the interview(s) could ask a candidate to talk about strategies he or she intentionally uses or has used in the past in an effort to connect with students. Also, to learn more about a candidate's philosophy of and approach to professionalism, the committee could ask the candidate to describe a role model, mentor, or other individual who best illustrates the candidate's definition of professionalism; the committee could also ask the candidate to do the opposite and describe an unprofessional example or create a scenario that describes what would be unprofessional in their eyes.

Finally, remembering that at the heart of each of these themes is the importance of instilling a sense of mattering and validation in students, those responsible for hiring faculty members or peer mentors in community colleges should communicate this value to potential employees and then try to get a sense of how a candidate views these two concepts. In an interview, candidates might be asked to share a personal experience in which they felt marginalized or invalidated or vice versa. The candidate also could be asked to share ideas about he or she would validate students and communicate to students that they matter.

Reviewing materials and asking questions that help to illuminate whether or not a candidate's attitudes and approaches are consistent with the expectation that the candidate be a "human lever" that supports community college student persistence will allow those responsible for hiring faculty members and peer mentors to determine if an individual can meet that expectation. By prioritizing these types of attitudes and behaviors in the hiring process, institutions have the opportunity to acquire and nurture the faculty and peer mentors who will be a vital resource in the battle to help all students persist and complete.

In Faculty and Staff Development

Of course, the hiring process is only the first step in creating a faculty or staff of peer mentors that can best serve students and support a college's student retention efforts. With regard to staffing, many community colleges, especially those in rural areas are also challenged by a small labor pool from which to recruit faculty and staff. Institutions have an opportunity to provide ongoing, meaningful professional development that can help to support the goal of increasing student retention and completion rates. We suggest that institutions consider the themes that emerged from this study when considering the topics and tracks for professional development programming for both faculty and for peer mentor staff members.

The first interaction the majority of new faculty or new peer mentors will engage in is an orientation program designed to prepare them to start their new jobs and acculturate with the institution in general. Most orientation programs, academic or otherwise, seek to teach new employees the basic skills that will allow them to navigate

the new workplace: using technology, learning about the employer (mission, vision, values, history, etc.), studying expectations for employees, getting to know colleagues and supervisors, and reviewing policies and procedures related to the job. We suggest that institutions should consider adding content to orientations that is related to the characteristics of human levers of retention. For example, orientations could discuss the importance of mattering and validation and how building relationships with students and connecting students to resources can help to support students' feelings of mattering and validation.

Another common professional development program on many campuses is a learning community. Milton D. Cox (2004), Director of the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Miami University, provided the following definition of a faculty learning community (FLC): "a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building" (p. 8). Cox suggested that participation in a faculty learning community offers many benefits for both faculty members and for the students they serve. As many FLCs choose a theme around which to build the curriculum for the academic year and plan readings and other activities based on that theme, we suggest that designing faculty learning community curriculum based upon the characteristics of the human levers would provide faculty members with multiple opportunities to engage in the study and practice of attitudes and behaviors that could positively impact student persistence.

However, faculty members are not necessarily the only groups on campus who could benefit from participation in a learning community. In Cox's description of an FLC, he noted that staff members are also part of this group. Therefore, peer mentors could be invited to participate in some or all functions of an institution's FLC, or they could form their own learning community. We do suggest, though, that learning communities be open to constituencies on campus, rather than exclusive to faculty members. With that in mind, institutions should consider choosing a different name for this form of professional development, as non-faculty members may feel disenfranchised by the term FLC, which implies that the group is not inclusive of other groups on campus.

Often professional development on college campuses can take the form of guest lectures, presentations, workshops or seminars led by external trainers, or activities led by faculty members or different entities on a campus. In many cases, these types of professional development activities take place during beginning of semester "convocation" programs or during designated professional development days on a campus. When planning the topics and themes for such events, faculty and staff developers could focus on providing professional development that supports student persistence by offering programs that help faculty and staff members to better understand and serve as human levers of retention.

One important factor to consider, though, is that it is important not to alienate faculty members or peer mentors who might consider themselves more introverted or less social than their colleagues who seem to easily and comfortably connect with students. Therefore, professional development related to relationship building must provide a

variety of strategies and a flexible definition of "relationship building," emphasizing and validating that there are many ways in which all faculty members or peer mentors can hope to connect with students.

Another important way that professional development and training for faculty and peer mentors can help to support retention is by encouraging faculty members and peer mentors to be observant about students' needs and challenges and be prepared to connect students with resources that can help them to persist. Representatives from departments or offices that provide various forms of support to students (tutoring, financial aid, counseling services, or other programs that represent resources for students) should be encouraged to develop presentations that can be given during faculty or staff meetings or during professional development programming for faculty.

By using the professional development mechanism and resources that institutions already have in place, it is possible to reach every faculty and staff member with knowledge about ways in which they can support student persistence by serving as a human lever. From orientations for newly hired faculty and staff members to learning communities related to developing traits associated with human levers, to ongoing professional development in the form of workshops and lectures; institutions have or can readily have activities in place that can better prepare employees to serve as human levers.

Further Research

While much has been learned with regard to how these human levers of retention perform at these individual institutions, this is merely their story of successes and what

they believe helped make an impact on retention. Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, should be conducted to test the effectiveness of these four practices and attitudes to impact student retention at community colleges at large.

Additionally, our research focused on institutions that were already successful and known for their successes within the state of Kentucky. More specifically we picked the two levers of retention that each college was most known for and most effective with. Further research could be done at institutions in which they are not known for their successes with faculty engagement and peer mentoring and then compare the better performing institutions practices and attitudes to those espoused by institutions that have not been as effective with these levers of retention.

Finally, further research could explore the student perspective on experiences working with faculty or peer mentors who have been identified as potential human levers of retention. Students, for example, could be asked to compare and contrast their experiences with these faculty and staff members with experiences with other faculty and staff who have not been designated as such. While we have gained an understanding of the faculty and peer mentor perspective, we have not studied the students with whom our population works. This information could, therefore, add depth to a further study.

Chapter 3

It's Not the People, It's Their Practices: Student

Practitioners Making an Impact on Student Success

With performance-based funding solidifying itself as the new norm in higher education, universities and community colleges are scrambling to identify means by which they can increase the retention of students without significantly impacting the college's bottom dollar expenditures. This corporatization of higher education, in examining the bottom dollar impact as well as the return on investment (ROI) of multiple initiatives across campuses has resulted in many institutions relying on tried and true levers of retention. These initiatives that institutions put into place to 'move the needle' on retention have been termed levers of retention by Braxton and Mundy (2001). Successful levers of retention consist of initiatives such as mandatory orientation, learning communities, identifying a final day to enroll in classes, etc. One of the most commonly used, and more successful, levers of retention that community colleges are employing at an increasing rate is that of instituting a peer mentoring program, this is especially true in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS). Peer mentoring programs are not a new invention within higher education, and research on their successfulness exist in both higher education and corporate realms for that matter. The impact of peer mentoring as a lever of retention is well documented and accepted without question, thus contributing to the increase in peer mentoring programs in community colleges. Within KCTCS, Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKYCTC) implemented the state's first peer mentoring program in

2015. The enaction of this lever of retention resulted in an average increase to retention of 15% amongst those that participated in the program. With a low cost per hour of labor, this program has been able to maintain a more than positive ROI netting the institution approximately 150k annually in return for the 100k annual investment in the program. This high ROI is possible through the usage of student practitioners as the primary means by which the program is run.

While much research exists to show the successes, program development and layouts of peer mentoring as a lever of retention, there is little research on the individuals who implement the lever of retention. In the case of SKYCTC it would be the student practitioners who become the lever of retention for the institution. Those students that fulfill the role of mentor, guide and coach new and incoming students to the community college. What is it about these student practitioners that allows them to be so successful as a lever of retention? What about their work styles and daily practices allow them to encourage the students they assist to persist at a higher rate than the students that do participate in the mentoring program? The purpose of this exploratory research is not to evaluate the program's effectiveness, but to learn the practices and attitudes that the peer mentors of SKYCTC apply in their work as a human lever of retention.

This study of peer mentoring is part of a larger collaborative research project exploring the experiences of both community college faculty and peer mentors as levers of retention (Russell & Barron, 2019). During the 2017-2018 academic year, we conducted an explorative qualitative study with the goal of examining, from the perspective of faculty and peer mentors, ways in which community colleges might positively impact student persistence by leveraging their existing resources, namely their

faculty and students themselves. We hoped to determine what traits, behaviors, attitudes, and skills held by these campus players could potentially positively influence retention. Our goal was to discover common themes and characteristics among those faculty members and peer mentors in order to better understand the knowledge, skills, preparation, and behavior of a human lever of retention.

This article explores in more depth the experiences of peer mentors who have been identified as effective human levers of retention, I sought to learn more about the ways in which these students conceive of their roles, their behaviors and skills, and the role of their institution in their work as levers of retention. The following questions guided this research:

A. In what ways do those identified as human levers of retention intentionally seek to positively influence retention and student success?

B. What common background characteristics, behaviors, motivations, attitudes, and approaches to working with students are shared by those identified as human levers of retention? In what ways do they feel they are distinguished from their colleagues in this area?

C. In what ways do those identified as human levers of retention define themselves as peer mentors, and how do they describe their role both at the institution and in the broader society?

D. What institutional practices and policies, in the views of the participants, support them as human levers of retention, and what institutional practices and policies hinder their ability to serve as an effective lever of retention?

For this study, the problem of practice is student attrition in the community college, and the phenomenon being explored is that of the peer mentor acting as human levers of retention. The program selected is the peer mentoring program at SKYCTC because of its unique status as the first of its kind in the State of Kentucky. Additionally, because of the maturity of the program it presents an additional added benefit in that there have been 43 current or prior peer mentors at the time the research was conducted. The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of these peer mentors and their perspectives on their role as levers of retention.

The primary method of generating data for this study was interviews with peer mentors. The research in this case provides a means to understand the shared character traits and backgrounds of the student practitioner serving in the role of peer mentor. Understanding the driving forces of these peer mentors can have multiple implications for future research and trainings to support the creation and development of additional peer mentoring programs. Being able to identify successful peer mentors in the hiring process allows for the most optimal scenario to enact peer mentoring as a lever of retention, there by continuing to allow community colleges to be good stewards of the resources given to them.

Literature Review

Providing Access and Support for Community College Students

Braxton and Mundy (2001) propose that the solution to the college student retention problem should be "derived from the theory and research of several theoretical

approaches" (p. 91) because the ill-structured problem of retention calls for multiple approaches. For this reason, the authors recommend that institutions practice multiple "institutional levers of action" to reduce student departure. Braxton and Mundy (2001) provide 47 recommendations, all emanating from their review of the retention literature, which should serve to promote student persistence. When examined closely, what many of these "levers of retention" described in 47 recommendations have in common is the human element of the institution. In other words, institutions should seek to understand the human needs of their students and should strive to meet those needs by preparing the people who work with those students to serve as human levers of retention.

In her study of ways in which community colleges could better promote student persistence and completion, Goldrick-Rab (2007) explains that students' "family backgrounds, prior education experiences, and educational expectations" [often fail] to "intersect with colleges' institutional structures, practices, and policies" (p. 1). Hoffman (2014) also suggests that attrition can be related to factors such as poor academic progress or financial problems, but she observes attrition can also stem from "…a poor academic self-concept, a lack of motivation, and minimal social integration and adjustment" (p. 13).

Engstrom and Tinto (2008) argue "Access without support is not opportunity. That institutions do not intentionally exclude students from college does not mean they are including them as fully valued members of the institution and providing them with support that enables them to translate access into success" (p. 50). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) point out that the success of students depends upon institutional structures and activities that are carefully aligned with and directed to student success. Barefoot (2004)

argues that research related to retention typically explores the student characteristics related to retention, or researchers examine how external environments can impact student persistence. However, according to Barefoot (2004), "Little research exists that explores the role of the college or university environment—especially the classroom itself—on student persistence" (p. 9).

Tinto and Braxton's Models of Commuter Student Retention

Vincent Tinto's Interactionalist Theory of student retention, according to Braxton et al. (2014), "enjoys paradigmatic stature" (p. 3). According to Braxton (2014) Tinto's theory of student persistence "puts emphasis on the student's interpretation of their interactions with the academic and social communities of a given college or university" (p. 73). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) describe Tinto's explanation of the college attrition process, which suggests that "students enter a college or university with varying patterns of personal, family, and academic characteristics and skills, including personal dispositions and intentions with respect to college attendance and personal goals" (p. 51). Then, according to Pascarella and Terenzini, interactions between the individual and the institution help to shape the students' intentions and commitments toward the institution longitudinally. The authors explain that Tinto's theory suggests "Satisfying and rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution are presumed to lead to greater integration in those systems and thus to student retention" (p. 51). Braxton et al. (2014) explain that Tinto "postulates that academic and social integration influence a student's subsequent commitments to the institution and to the goal of graduation" (p. 74). Therefore, the greater the levels of academic and social integration, "the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the focal college or

university" (Braxton et. Al, 2014, p. 74). Additionally, according to Braxton (2000), "Tinto (1997) contends that if social integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom because the classroom functions as a gateway for student involvement in the academic and social communities of a college" (p. 570). In summarizing Tinto's 1993 theory of retention, Shelton (2000) notes that students must feel that they benefit from their educational experience, so if students do not integrate socially and academically, "varying forms of dropout behavior will result, including transferring to a different institution, leaving higher education voluntarily, or failing academically" (p. 69).

Braxton and his colleagues, however, question the validity of the Tinto framework to explain the student departure process, particularly as it relates to commuter students. Braxton et al. (2014) report that 13 testable propositions are apparent from Tinto's 1975 model, which Braxton et al. (2014) suggest require strong empirical support in order to prove truly consistent and valid to understanding the student departure problem. According to Braxton et al. (2014) using the "box score" method, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) evaluated the level of empirical support for Tinto's propositions. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) explained their method, noting, "The percentage of tests of a given proposition that affirm the position provides the basis for the box score for each of the thirteen propositions. Strong empirical support was allocated to a proposition of 66 percent or more of three or more tests of that proposition yielded statistically significant affirmation" (p. 11-12). The authors then explain the way in which they determined if support was moderate or weak. Braxton et al. (2014) reported that, regarding research conducted at two-year colleges, only one of the thirteen propositions showed strong empirical support and therefore Tinto's theory "lacks

explanatory power in commuter institutional settings" (p. 78).   According to Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), Tinto's proposition that "student entry characteristics directly affect the likelihood of students' persistence in college" (p. 17) was the only one that received a score indicating robust support.

Therefore, in the monograph *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure* (2004), Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon propose a need to both "seriously revise Tinto's theory and to propose other theories" (p. 2) that would help to account for student departure from both residential and commuter institutions. According to Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), Tinto's "interactionalist theory fails to adequately address" (p. 35) the unique characteristics of commuter institutions, which the authors state "lack well-defined and –structured social communities for students to establish membership" (p. 35) and are attended by students who "typically experience conflicts among their obligations to family, work, and college" (p. 35). In *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure* (2004), Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon describe how they constructed their theory of student departure, which describes sixteen propositions to help explain their student departure theory in commuter institutions, and they categorize these propositions according to four areas: economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) explain, "The basic elements of this theory include student entry characteristics, the external environment, the campus environment, and the academic communities of the institution" (p. 42-43).

Braxton et al. (2014) describe the four categories that make up the component parts of the theory of student departure, along with revisions made to the 2004 theory.

The authors noted that academic ability, past academic achievement, and level of initial

commitment to the institution can be categorized as entry characteristics. In addition to

the characteristics commonly cited by a number of theories, Braxton et al. (2014)

contended, other student entry characteristics, such as students' motivation to attend

college, their need for control, their sense of self-efficacy, their empathy, their need for

social affiliation, their parents' educational level, and their engagement in anticipatory

socialization prior to college entrance, emanate from the characteristics of the external

environment and the campus environment of commuter colleges and universities (p. 111-

112).

Regarding students' external environment, the authors presented information

regarding the conflicts students in commuter institutions fact between their lives outside

of the institution and their participation in higher education, and Braxton et al. (2014)

argued that, for these students, "encouragement and support for attending college

becomes crucial" (p. 112). The authors also point out that students who receive support

for college attendance from significant others are more likely to persist in a commuter

institution, and adequate financial support can encourage more support from significant

others.

Braxton et al. (2014) also describe the impact of the campus environment on

"student perceptions of their experiences the institutional environment of the commuter

college or university" (p. 113). Like Braxton, Tinto (1997) acknowledges that students

who commute to college, particularly those who have numerous external obligations, do

not have the opportunities for social integration that students in residential colleges are

given. In their discussion of the campus environment, Braxton et al. (2014) observe that

commuter students typically spend their time on campus hurrying to attend classes and

engage in activities necessary to meeting degree requirements, and the authors observed

that students typically then leave campus in a hurry to meet personal or work obligations

off campus, limiting the kinds of social involvement for students at these institutions.

According to Braxton et al. (2014), "These forms of comings and goings create a

'buzzing confusion'" (p. 113) that students must learn to adjust to if they are to make

progress toward completion. Braxton et al. (2014) noted that the buzzing confusion

contributes to commuter students' need "to believe that attending college will result in

academic success and graduation" (p. 114). Further, the authors contend that "the lack of

well-defined and ill-structure student social communities poses difficulties to students

with a need for social affiliation" (p. 115).

Braxton et al. (2014) explain that "commitment of the institution to student

welfare and institutional integrity encompass such organizational characteristics" (p.

116). Braxton et al. (2014) suggest that students are more committed to an institution

that appears to be true to its goals and mission and displays concern for the students'

welfare. Kuh et al. (2005) observe, "Students perform better and are more satisfied at

colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social

relations among different groups on campus" (p. 13). According to Braxton et al. (2014),

"the more a student perceives that their college or university is committed to the welfare

of its students, the greater the student's degree of subsequent commitment to their college

or university" (p. 117). Braxton and Mundy (2001-2002) contend that, to build upon

Tinto's three principles of effective retention, "A fourth principle might emphasize

institutional characteristics such as mission, culture, structure, and organization as critical

counterparts to the current retention principles that focus on the individual student, faculty, staff and/or administration" (p. 95).

By considering retention from a student development perspective and placing student development at the core of the institutional mission, institutions can create a culture that better meets the needs of students and promotes persistence toward completion. According to Braxton and Mundy (2001-2002), "Colleges and universities that assure that student learning is not left to chance best illustrate this principle in action (p. 95).

Rendon's Validation Theory, Rosenberg's Mattering Theory, and Schlossberg's Transition Theory as Complements to Tinto's and Braxton's Models of Retention

Significant connections to others can enhance a student's sense of being valued and cared for (Roberts & Stryron, 2010; Jacoby, 2000). Conceptually defined as validation, sense of belonging, and mattering, researchers have explored the ways in which positive relationships can make a difference to students' experiences.

Rendon's (1994) research on the theory of validation provides insight into the importance of positive relationships on campus. Rendon observes that today's diverse student body is more likely to feel alienated by traditional college culture in which competition and passive learning are the common practice. Rendon's data from interviews collected from diverse community college students suggested that faculty who fostered academic validation in interactions with students helped students to "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (p. 40).

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Rendon adds that validating actions both in class and out of class helped to foster individual and social integration.

Rendon's (1994) study indicates that students were transformed by "incidents where some individual, either in-or out-of-class, took an active interest in them—when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic efforts and social adjustment" (p. 44). In Rendon's keynote address to the American River Community College (1994), she noted that students, particularly non-traditional and culturally diverse students, will be more likely to persist if faculty members help students to develop positive attitudes about their capacity to learn. Explaining the difference between involvement and validation, Rendon (1994) explained that validation occurs when someone actively reaches out to support students in their academic endeavors and affirms their ability to be successful, powerful learners; and Rendon urged that this validation must occur in a student's critical first semester.

Barnett (2011) echoes Rendon's call for validation of students in community colleges, stating that validation may actually be more important than academic and social integration. Barnett's examples of validating behaviors by faculty and college staff include "talking with students about their personal goals, showing an appreciation of their personal and cultural history, or taking extra time to help students learn class material" (p. 197). Barnett's study of community college students suggested that "higher levels of faculty validation modestly predicted increases in students' intent to persist," with three sub constructs of validation (caring instruction, students feeling known and valued, and students being mentored by faculty members) showing significant impact on students'

intent to persist. According to Barnett (2011), these findings are particularly important when considering community college students both because of today's community college student population and the fact that community college students primarily engage with the college environment in the classroom. Barnett concluded that a focus on validation of community college students could help institutions to retain students more effectively.

Similar to Rendon's validation theory is the concept of mattering, originally introduced by Morris Rosenberg in 1981, defined as "…the perception that, to some degree and in any variety of ways, we are a significant part of the world around us" (Elliott and Kao, 2004, p. 339). Schlossberg (1989) applies the concept of mattering to higher education, suggesting that commuter students have been made to feel marginalized by the institutions, which is the opposite of mattering. Further, Schlossberg contends that in a period of transition, feeling marginalized puts students at risk of attrition. Transition, as defined by Schlossberg (1989), is any event that causes a change in routines, values, assumptions, roles, or relationships. As Schlossberg (1989) explains, though often commuter students and college personnel can view students' transition to higher education as a "non-event," it is important to understand the challenges that occur during transitional periods. Further, many students enroll in community college due to other transitions in their lives such as changes in employment or family circumstances. Schlossberg (1989) describes commuter students as often feeling like "strangers in a new world" who do not feel control over their lives or a sense of confidence in their ability to meet standards set by professors. Schlossberg's (1989) research suggests that student

who felt they mattered to an institution or an individual within the institution were more engaged in learning.

Shelly (2014) outlines five aspects of mattering identified by Schlossberg, which include attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. Shelly (2014) explains that students need to feel that others have noticed them and are interested in them, that others care about what happens to them, that other people are proud of their successes and concerned about their failures, that they are needed by others, and that others notice their efforts. According to Shelly (2014), "Knowing that we matter helps us to persist through our discomfort when we change roles or when we move from a familiar and safe environment to a new and challenging one" (p. 3).

The Role of Peers and Peer Mentoring in Community College Student Persistence

One of the levers that many community colleges have chosen in order to address the need to support student completion is the usage of mentoring programs. The utilization of mentoring programs at the community college level has greatly increased in recent years, as well as the research centered on the impacts, variables, definitions, and assessments of the mentoring programs. While there are multiple types of mentoring programs (faculty-to-faculty, faculty-to-student, community-to-student, and peer-to-peer), peer mentoring programs can be a programmatic lever institutions can use to address issues of retention and persistence within the community college, meeting all three of Tinto's principles of effective retention.

The influence of peers in a college setting has been the source of a number of studies, as researchers have observed that peers are often one of the first points contact

for new students making the transition to college. Further, according to (Crisp, 2009; DiTommaso, 2010), peer mentoring has been shown in multiple studies to have a positive impact on student retention, though further research is required for an in depth explanation of the factors that have contributed to its success. Peer mentoring seeks to increase the social integration and social capital of the students who are coming to college. Effective peer mentoring serves to increase students' social integration, academic integration, goal setting behaviors, and institutional commitment (Nora and Crisp, 2007; DiTommaso, 2010; Crisp, 2009; Khazanov, 2011). Further the student practitioners used in peer mentoring can fill the role of "some individual" reaching out during the "critical first semester" as Rendon's validation theory states is necessary to successful student retention (1994).

For example, the authors suggested that to increase student retention and success, "colleges should conduct training for faculty, staff, and administrators to promote awareness and knowledge of appropriate resources within both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs that connect and support students in their transition process" (qtd. In Nora and Crisp, 2007). Another recommended lever of retention is to, "design mentoring programs in such a way that psychological growth occurs along the following dimensions: approach/avoidance coping strategies, locus of control, academic and social self-efficacy" (p. 114). However, to implement a peer mentoring program that can serve as an effective lever of retention, it is important to define mentoring and understand what empirical research states regarding the characteristics of effective mentors and mentoring relationships.

Four Domains to Mentoring

Amuary Nora and Gloria Crisp (2007) identified four key domains that should be present in every mentoring program. The first of the four domains is psychological and emotional support. This can come in many forms from being a source of encouragement and motivation to simply an ear to listen. This is especially critical for onboarding first-time-in-college students that may be the first in their families to attend college and have a limited social capital for handling the rigor and uniqueness that college presents to incoming freshmen. In this situation the mentor can be expected to provide the additional moral support needed to encourage the incoming student to persist and work towards completing the educational goals that they have set before themselves.

The second key domain to a mentor relationship is that of helping the protégé with goal setting and finding a career pathway. Within this domain, Nora and Crisp (2007) have identified six different attributes of focus: 1) a review of the protégé's strengths and weaknesses, major and career interest, and beliefs; 2) participation in critical thinking exercises with regard to the future of the protégé; 3) a reflection in which both the mentor and the mentee reflect on the paths being considered and selected; 4) instruction in goal setting practices; 5) analysis and evaluation of past decisions and discussion regarding decision-making processes; and 6) support and encouragement of the mentee's dreams (p. 343). According to Nora and Crisp (2007) each of these steps is highly valuable in assisting mentees to both visualize and realize their goals and aspirations.

The third key domain, according to Nora and Crisp (2007) is academic subject knowledge support. This is not necessarily referring to a specific academic field at all

times, like mathematics; instead it is important for the student-to-student mentor-to-mentee relationship that the mentee have a good understanding of the social capital required in order to be successful in higher education. This is especially important when the mentee is a first-generation college student with minimal additional outside resources that can help explain to them what to expect at the collegiate level. Also, if the mentee is coming from a low socioeconomic background it is important that the mentor be able to help bridge the gap to the middle class norms that higher education operates within.

Nora and Crisp (2007) noted that the fourth domain is that of being a role model. It is imperative that the mentor be able to use his or her life experiences both inside the classroom and out to help the mentee gain a better grasp of the expectations and a pathway in which they might navigate along their educational journey. It is within this fourth domain that the mentors have the greatest ability to share with their mentees the social capital that is needed to be a successful student and be retained into the second semester and second year of college.

Methodology

Glesne (2006) explains that qualitative research seeks "to make sense of personal narratives and the ways in which they intersect" (p. 1). Rubin and Rubin (1995) observed that qualitative research, particularly interviewing, allows researchers "to acquire a rich understanding of other people's lives and experiences" (p. vii). According to Glesne (2006), "Qualitative research methods are used to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions" (p. 4). This study seeks to understand the experiences of peer mentoring from the perspectives of a

set of peer mentors at SKYCTC, particularly with regard to the ways they understand their roles in the support of student success at the college.

Creswell (2014) described qualitative research as an approach that allows researchers to explore and make sense of "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). The assumption in this study, then, is that the peer mentors and faculty members who have been identified as being the human levers of retention would provide the best insight into the phenomenon of actually being one of those individuals. They are the best sources of data to explain their backgrounds, their experiences, their philosophies, their challenges, and their approaches to their work.

The following questions guided the research:

C. In what ways do those identified as human levers of retention intentionally seek to positively influence retention and student success?

D. What common background characteristics, behaviors, motivations, strengths, priorities, attitudes, and approaches to working with students are shared by those identified as human levers of retention? In what ways do they feel they are distinguished from their colleagues in this area?

Site and Participant Selection

Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKYCTC) was selected as the site for the peer mentor study because the college has an established peer mentoring program and has collected several semesters' worth of student retention data indicating that the program could have influenced some of the gains in student persistence semester-to-semester. SKYCTC created the program in a response to the increased emphasis on retention and graduation rates after realizing that despite an above

average three-year graduation rate (approximately 33% at the time), the only way to continue to improve was to find a way to ensure more students made it past the first semester and into the second. At the time of implementation, the first semester rate of persistence into the second semester was approximately 72%. Since developing and implementing the peer mentoring program, retention of first-semester students at SKYCTC has increased to 87-90% depending on the semester; further, their overall three-year graduation rate increased to 36%.

This commitment to student success did not come without an institutional cost. An annual allocation of 100k is set aside each year to run and operate the program. This budget is significantly dedicated to salaries of the peer mentors, with approximately 98% of the budget going to this cause. The remaining 2% is then allocated to employee uniforms, name badges, and office supplies. The program is run through the Office of Student Life and Engagement and the peer mentors serve as additional support to that office to help facilitate campus engagement opportunities when they are not meeting with their mentees. Each semester 15-20 peer mentors are hired to serve the needs of 900 incoming students in the fall and 550 in the spring, of which approximately half will participate in the peer mentoring program each semester. Hiring and leadership is provided by the Director of Student Life and Engagement.

The Student Ambassador Program SKYCTC is the first of its kind in KCTCS. Student Ambassadors at SKYCTC must complete at least 12 credit hours at SKYCTC, maintain at least a 3.0 GPA, and obtain a letter of recommendation from a faculty member in order to be considered for employment as a peer mentor. Student Ambassadors are paid $10 per hour for 15 hours per week to serve as peer mentors for

incoming students to the college. They are provided with 30 hours of training focused upon how to be a successful peer mentor and what their role in retention and student success will consist of. The training mirrors that of which would be required of academic advisors, but differs in that the peer mentors are clearly informed to consistently remember that they are not an academic advisor and instead their role is to serve as a coach and guide along the student's educational journey. The training has evolved over the course of the program and is currently facilitated and created by the previous year's peer mentors based on what they believe is the most important key factors for the student and peer mentor's success.

Once the peer mentors have been trained, they are then paired with a population of students that match their general majors. Students going into the technical fields receive a mentor who is currently majoring in a technical field. Associate of Arts majors are paired with other associate of arts majors and so on. This was done to allow the peer mentor the opportunity to speak directly to the courses and experience their assigned mentee would be experiencing. The average case load of students ranged from 30-40, while the technical fields had a higher case load do to less intensive participation from that population of students.

After being assigned their mentee list, peer mentors reach out to the entire list of potential mentees and encourage the mentees to come in and meet with their assigned peer mentor at their earliest convenience. They are intentional to ensure that the students know it is an expectation for participation, as the college has invested significantly in the program, though they do not tell them it is required. They reach out to the mentees via phone and email. Once a meeting is established the best method for contact is determined

and used from that point on. For those students that choose not to participate, they are made aware that they will continue to receive weekly emails with important "need to know" activities for the first semester.

The meetings themselves are semi-structured. Meetings follow a step-by-step checklist created by the prior year's peer mentors, and cover topics of goal setting and welcoming to the college; planning for the second semester; and, scholarships to pay for college. Each meeting has a suggested step-by-step process that most will follow, though all make minor variations and are encouraged to take ownership of their work, with the mindset that the peer mentors will create the training for next year's mentors.

All 43 current and former Student Ambassadors as of August 2017 were invited to participate in the research study. Each of the peer mentors were invited to participate in the research based on all peer mentors being previously identified as excellent students and peer leaders who went through a competitive hiring process in which they were selected from more than 200 candidates for the job of peer mentor. Potential participants then were asked to self-select for participation if they felt that they were an exemplary peer mentor.

Of note is the demographics of the students that self-selected into participation in this research is a good representation of the composition of the peer mentors as a whole. Half of the peer mentor participants were in their second experience with college after either a not so successful first attempt, or a significant major change between the first and second attempt. Some had completely failed out of college in their first attempt and took multiple years to join the workforce before returning to earn their degree. For these

students, there was a since of trying to ensure others did not make their same mistakes along their educational journey. For many of these students there was an enhanced focus on the cost of attending college.

Also, three of the peer mentors who participated in the research immediately went to college graduating high school early. These students would most often be described as having high academic standards and their studies were of great significance to them. These students emerged as leaders within the program, despite the large age gap between them and their peers. They possessed maturity beyond their years.

Additionally, one of the potential participants that had expressed a desire to participate had to remove herself from the pool as she had recently married a US Marine and expected to relocate multiple time within the research period and did not believe that she would be able to participate fully.

Table 3.1 Peer Mentor Demographics

Gender	Age	Major
Female	18**	Radiography
Female	23*	Associate of Arts
Male	33*	Welding
Male	24	Computer Science
Female	32*	Surgical Tech
Male	19**	Associate of Arts

Female	24*	Associate of Arts
Female	19**#	Associate of Arts / Culinary
Female	21#	Medical Information Technology
Female	40*	Computer Science

*second attempt at college   **early High School graduate   #original peer mentor

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted two individual interviews of appreciative inquiry with each of the participants. The first interview focused upon background characteristics such as educational pathways, educational experiences, and professional aspirations. The second set of interviews asked participants to share their specific approaches to and strategies for working with community college students. I also asked participants about the ways in which they conceived of their role peer mentors. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed using an electronic transcription service. I compared the original recordings with written transcripts to ensure accuracy. Originally, 7 participants emerged from the study and while multiple themes emerged, and I believed a saturation point had been reached, to be sure one more round of invitations was sent. Three additional participants chose to participate and confirmed the saturation of major themes.

As part of the larger collaborative study, Kim and I composed a short memo to record initial impressions and a brief, overall summary of each interview within a day of the interview's completion, and these interviews were stored in folders along with the individual transcripts for each interview. In addition, we shared the transcripts and

summaries from our respective fieldwork for increased rigor. We individually and then collaboratively reviewed each interview transcript and generated initial open codes, we then returned to the data iteratively examining relationships between those codes and in the context of our framework of validation and mattering theories.

Once all transcripts were open coded and then reviewed and compared by both researchers, the researchers met to make connections between the open codes, and those open codes considered both valid and important by both researchers were aggregated, creating axial codes that were more thematic in nature. For example codes such as "assisting students with financial aid questions," "taking students to an office that can help them," "letting students know about counseling on campus," and "helping students learn to navigate the college website" were all combined (with other related open codes) to generate the axial code "connecting students to college resources." The axial codes were then used to again code each transcript, and interviewers worked together to generate a document in which emergent themes were described. This document then served as the basis for discussion that took place in group meetings.

I then met with the students for a group interview lasting approximately two hours, with Kim assisting to listen and take notes as I facilitated the meeting. I did the same for her in group interviews with faculty. I shared with the mentors our preliminary analysis of the data and asked for their feedback. I then incorporated these data into the next iteration of analysis to develop my working assertions further.

Role of Researchers

As Kim and I are both employees of the colleges selected as the sites for our collaborative project, it is important to the integrity of our work that we examine our

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roles within the institutions and our reasons for the selection of the two sites. Though we acknowledge that convenience played a role in our site selection process, we argue that the two sites we selected met our selection criteria in that both institutions offered subjects—faculty in one case and students in the other—who were part of a group that had demonstrated effectiveness. Because we wanted to learn about the people who represented a "best case" type of scenario, these two sites met our needs.

It is essential for us to have an understanding of the ways in which our positions and roles impact a number of aspects of our study. For the sake of our ability to analyze the data we collect and to understand the connection between our own personal/professionals perspectives and the ways in which that impacts how we interpret what we see and hear. Further, knowing ourselves and acknowledging the factors that influence our own biases and expectations have allowed us to more clearly and objectively find meaning in our data. For the sake of our audience, it is important that we make a genuine effort to describe our backgrounds and roles so that readers can further contextualize the information we share and hopefully develop enhanced confidence in the validity and trustworthiness of our work.

At the time of the study, I served as the Director of Student Life and Engagement at SKYCTC. I am also a community college graduate who has a passion for the community college as an institution. I worked in student affairs at a Texas Community College for several years before moving to Kentucky to accept my position at SKYCTC. I helped to develop, organize, and supervise a peer mentoring program at the Texas community college; and I was asked to develop a similar program when came to SKYCTC. I spent over four years handling all aspects of the Student Ambassador

Program at SKYCTC, including structuring, budgeting, hiring, training, assessing, recruiting, and marketing.

As we embarked our research project, there were several ethical questions and other issues to consider, and perhaps the most important one is to be able to understand ourselves as researchers. We needed to consider how our own experiences and beliefs shape the way we perceive what we saw and heard. Because we conducted "backyard" research, we needed to be careful not to let what we think we know about these human subjects affect our data collection and ability to listen and observe carefully. Both in the interviews and in the reporting of data, it was important not to project ourselves on the participants. Further, it was important that participants felt that they could be candid in their responses to questions and that no professional or personal harm would result from their participation in the study.

We both acknowledge that the integrity of the study depends upon the way in which the ethical issues surrounding backyard research are both honestly acknowledged and thoughtfully handled throughout the study. We understood that failure to consider the ethical concerns surrounding the study could result in loss of credibility, professional relationships, and reputation both inside and outside the institutions. In addition, unethical behaviors could possibly compromise the opportunity for future researchers to work within the institutions.

Several procedures and practices were structured to allow us to maintain the ethical integrity of the study. First, we allowed other parties to identify the participants within the parameters of the research design. Also, the criteria used to identify the

participants was based upon a review of literature completed by both researchers and could, therefore, be used to identify participants in any community college, not just the two with which we are affiliated. Working as a team we provided support and an internal "audit" for one another's subjectivity. With both researchers coding all interview data, reviewing all documents collected, and participating in on one another's group interviews, we added to the validity of the work, which helped to preserve the overall integrity of the study. Finally, by involving participants in activities designed to serve as "member checking," we further ensured our data was accurately represented and communicated.

It is unrealistic to expect that researchers come to a project with a completely blank slate. It is also undesirable that a researcher is a completely blank slate, as his or her previous experiences and knowledge about the topic can serve to enrich the researcher's understanding of the data. However, what is essential is that researchers acknowledge these factors to themselves as well as to their audiences and subjects. There are standards for good research, and good research is not necessarily "objective" at all. Rather, an ethical researcher is able to show how his or her ethics helped to shape the design process in order for the work to meet the standards of quality research.

Findings

The emergent practices and attributes I defined during the analysis of individual interviews were supported in the group interview. Two themes emerged. First, that these peer mentors had an understanding of the value of higher education and the cultural capital it takes to see the big picture: professionalism, being goal driven, and recognizing the economics of higher education. Second, that these peer mentors had a lot of academic

capital (knowing how to study, how to work the class/faculty/academic work environments, how to build relationships with others to help them and nurture them, how to capitalize on resources including finding the funding to make it all work). These two layers of cultural awareness created the framework for good peer mentoring.

Cultural Capital

Self-awareness of what Bourdieu (1979) calls cultural capital—norms, dispositions, attitudes, language traits, and behaviors—that is required to be a successful student in the social field of higher education is an attribute that all participants exhibited in some way. While it may have been articulated differently by all, the key dispositions and attitudes necessary to being a successful human lever of retention were that of professionalism, being goal driven and having an understanding of the cost of their education. Additionally, each of the peer mentors exhibited a well-defined sense of who their future self would be and they utilized this self-knowledge to ensure that who they were today would lead to their desired results of their future self. Not only did the students possess this cultural capital, they recognized that sharing these dispositions, attitudes, and skills with their mentees was an important part of being a successful peer mentor.

Successful student practitioners have a professional sense of self with a sense of maturity and an organized approach to assisting the mentees. Within the group of participants, half were non-traditional students who had not immediately successfully started their education after high school. While it may be expected that these five students would bring a sense of maturity to the job from their simple age maturity, maturity was something that was shared throughout all peer mentors regardless of age or experience,

including two that graduated high school early and immediately started at SKYCTC being a very young 18 years of age when they were hired for this role. The maturity that they possessed was more than simply one that was earned by growing another year older. Instead, their definition of maturity was synonymous with being more closely related to professionalism and organization. All ten of the student practitioners recognized that being well organized with the approach to connecting to their mentees, taking a mature position in conversations with their mentees, and practicing professionalism in the work place helped them make a difference in their role as mentors as they shared and demonstrated these characteristics with their mentees.

Similar to professionalism was a disposition toward being goal driven and seeking to improve themselves. All of the peer mentors described or demonstrated that they were driven to achieve more than they had already accomplished. This started in their personal lives and spilled over into their work. One student practitioner stated, "my strengths as a student are definitely my inner drive that I use to make sure that I can complete everything that I need to do to keep me motivated, to make sure that I always see my end goal…" This 'inner drive' was another one of the attitudes they sought to communicate with their mentees.

While all of the mentors were goal driven, this driven desire to improve was even more evident in the 5 non-traditional students. Many of these students were coming to college for the second time in life, some after failing out of college miserably the first time. As one student practitioner put it, "the first time I went to school my GPA was a soaring 0.0", she would go on to state that her rededication to her goal of becoming a

surgical technician pushed her to graduate after her second attempt with a 4.0 GPA and be at the top of her class.

The mentors described trying to share this drive throughout their meetings with their mentees to instill in their mentees a similar sense of being goal driven. Part of this was structured by the peer mentor curriculum, as the entire first meeting for the program focused on identifying and encouraging goals in their mentees. However, they described having a long game vision for the everyday tasks of being a student as something they consistently stressed in all their interactions with their mentees.

A particular observation that was shared amongst 7 out of the 10 participants, was the unique attention to the cost of education as a whole. For many, they knew first hand just how expensive their own education was. For some this was because they were solely responsible for paying for their education and had minimal assistance from scholarships or family, for others it was simply because of their level of maturity that they did not wish to waste their family's hard-earned money. Regardless to their circumstances, this awareness of the cost of education kept showing itself in the different ways they worked with their mentees. For some the cost of education was even the driving force for them applying to be a peer mentor. Sure, they had a desire to help others be successful, but the small monetary compensation for their efforts toward being a human lever of retention helped push them to want to do the job even more.

For some, they would focus substantially on making sure that their mentees knew all about student scholarships. They would go over how to apply, write applications, and ask for letters of recommendation from faculty. For others, they would focus intently on

the courses that their mentees would take each following semester, doing their best to ensure that they never took a course that was not needed, or a course load that would not lend itself to success. Both strategies were identified by the mentors because they realized the cost of their own and their mentee's education. They would share with their mentees how these strategies would impact the cost of the education and used these conversations to communicate the value of the peer mentoring program; that if they participated in the program and paid attention to the strategies introduced, they were more likely to be successful at finding additional resources and/or forego unnecessary costs of repeating classes or dropping out without a credential. One student practitioner stated, in response to being asked the most important thing to helping students finish their degree, that a critical issue for student success was finances and how she personally understood the cost of education both in money and time away from her two daughters. She stressed the importance of providing a lifeline and guidance to student scholarships so that they can be successful.

While communicating strategies to mitigate the cost of education and emphasizing an awareness of student finances was not something that every student practitioner focused on, it was was shared by the majority in their individual interviews and validated in the group interview an issue of importance. This may be something that is a direct result of working with students who attend a community college where approximately 85% of students are Pell Grant eligible. This understanding of current costs of education played into their view of their future selves and how the necessary costs of education today would eventually result in their desired end product of who they wanted to become.

This self awareness of the cultural capital of professionalism, maturity, and goal driven attitudes is significant because these are all character traits that can be sought out in the interview process and through requiring references from faculty members of the staff that can vouch for their professionalism, maturity and organizational skills. Even if a student practitioner is hired that does not yet fully posses these skill sets or awareness of their importance, they are attributes that can be learned through purposeful professional development opportunities. Similar to awareness of the importance of professionalism, maturity, and being goal driven, self-awareness of the costs of education is again an attribute of potential peer mentors that could be broached through the interview process and certainly trained for once a student is hired. Insuring that all peer mentors know how to encourage their mentees to apply strategies for mitigating the costs of education through the processes of applying for student scholarships and/or careful navigation of course selection is certainly a worthwhile effort.

Academic Capital

As a subset of broader attributes of cultural capital that the peer mentors both exhibited and sought to instill in their mentees, they also emphasized the importance of acquiring the specific norms, skills, and attitudes necessary to do well as a student and tried to pass these along to their mentees. The peer mentors used their academic capital to develop relationships with their faculty and students in ways that would allow them to academically be successful. They also were incredibly intent of being studious in the areas of their studies that aligned with their future goals, for example the welding mentor never made below an A in the welding classes, though his overall GPA was not a 4.0.

Further, the peer mentors sought to be involved in campus activities as they viewed the activities as contributing to their co-curricular education and experienced growth in their academic capital through participation. And lastly, they sought to connect students to the resources that were ideal to further one's academic journey, such as financial resources of student scholarships and academic resources such as tutoring.

The ability to be very studious in one's own studies arose from the interviews with all student practitioners. Whether they were discussing their incredibly impressive GPA, many of them maintaining a 4.0 after two years of study, or simply stating their dedication to ensuring their full participation in every class they could attend. For these student practitioners, their studies are incredibly important. One stated, "As a student in my spare time, that's all I do is study and read. And if I don't know something I'll look it up until I do know it. I'm very dedicated to being a student."

Another student practitioner stated, "I am always paying close attention to what my instructor is teaching, making sure that I take notes. If there are moments where it's like, hey, have a good time with your classmates during this presentation, then I go for it. But other than that I'm always making sure that I'm staying focused on what they're teaching so that way I can grasp as much as I can." This shared dedication to being studious was present in all student practitioners and some even made sure to intentionally teach it to their mentees. All focused on ensuring their grades maintained at an incredibly high level, and some even did so for more than just the grade but more for the shear reason of learning. to facilitate their continued success as a student.

In addition to be studios, the mentors stressed the importance of being involved with campus clubs and organizations. 7 out of the 10 participants took part in campus life through clubs and organizations and stressed that for them it was important to get their mentees involved in campus life as well. One student practitioner stated, "I'll try to get them plugged in on campus. That's one of my, kind of when I meet with students is one of my biggest focuses is trying to see if there's any clubs that they might be interested in because I know I've had a great experience of being in student clubs. And so, uh, you know, if there's any opportunity, if there's anything that they are interested in, I try to see what clubs match up best and get them involved."

This focus on involvement in campus clubs was intentional for the 7 that paid attention to it. For them it was a part of their own personal sense of belonging to the institution and they tried to share that with their mentees. That being said, there were three highly successful student practitioners that did not make this a focus as they were not personally involved in campus clubs; however, they still recognized the importance of campus life for students to feel that they belong.

Finally, the mentors' identification of the importance of having the maturity and professionalism to see their college education as part of a larger life plan (and planning carefully to make that education affordable) was also tied to their recognition of their role in helping their mentees acquire a sense of belonging and mattering in ways similar to that described in the literature (Rendon and Schlossberg-fix citation). The students emphasized being relationship oriented. One student practitioner responded to the question, "What is the single most effective practice that you did to help out retention, what would that have been?" with the answer, "I guess just being there for them, you

know, just being that person to lean on and confide in. Just being a mentor for them…
just giving them that extra person that they know they could come to if they need it." This
response showed the student practitioners belief that the most important thing they could
do was to be supportive of their mentees and that was accomplished through establishing
a relationship with the mentee.

One student practitioner stated, "let me be like a roadmap for you" as she highlighted
how she would connect her mentees to the necessary resources for students to be
successful. This concentrated attention to the value of a network helped the most
successful peer mentors get to know the campus and community, helping to be the initial
contact for their students to this new network. They acted as more than a gatekeeper, but
instead they were a door opener. They helped their mentees to realize a sense of
belonging through their introduction to key areas of student services, campus clubs and
organizations, or merely just connecting new students to a friend group. This pivotal role
was one that all participants tried to fulfill as they encouraged their mentees to feel a part
of the institution.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged from interviewing high performing human levers of
retention in Kentucky's first community college peer mentoring program echo those that
are common in the literature on retention. I believe these elements of developing positive
relationships for students on campus should be seen as a whole, more than just
developing relationships, communicating strategies and modeling key attributes and
dispositions of successful students work together in the success of a peer mentoring
program. For this reason, it is my recommendation that in recruiting student practitioners,

peer mentoring programs have as a focus not only academic measures of success, but also attributes of professionalism, maturity, and self-awareness of the academic capital necessary to be successful students and to converting that success to reaching life goals. Furthermore, potential mentors need to know how to connect new student to necessary resources and be well versed on those that the institution has to offer. They need to be involved in campus life so that they can encourage their mentees to do the same. Lastly, they need to their mentee navigate the costs, both monetarily and from family time and commitment, to achieving their educational dreams.

Future research should be conducted on exactly how self awareness and the purposeful communication of strategies for success can play a major factor in the success of the student practitioner actively implementing the lever of retention known as peer mentoring. Students' self-awareness is not easily taught or developed in training programs; therefore, ways to develop this reflexivity deserves further study. And finally, while this study focused upon peer mentors who self-described themselves as meeting the common definition of a good mentor, a study that includes the mentees perspectives would be useful to developing these programs further.

Chapter 4

Peer Mentoring in Kentucky Community and Technical College System: A Guide to Creating Successful Partnerships Between Students, Impacting Persistence, and Retention

Introduction

By the 2020-2021 academic year, the State of Kentucky will have moved higher education to the funding model approved by the 2017 legislature, by which 100% of state dollars will be allocated on a performance-based funding model. This model allocates 35% toward course completion, 35% to student success, 10% to academic support, 10% to institutional support, and 10% to maintenance and operations. With this new funding model, there are new opportunities to bring additional dollars to the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) through strategic levers of retention. One proven lever of retention within Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKYCTC) is that of a peer mentoring program. This program was the first of its kind in the state and has helped increase persistence rates 15% from semester to semester for participants. The purpose of this whitepaper is to outline a successful implementation plan for peer mentor programs across KCTCS colleges.

Background

In the 2015-2016 academic year SKYCTC was facing concerns over graduation and default rates as it related to federal financial aid. Too many students were failing to

graduate with a degree and in turn becoming delinquent on their loan repayments due to lack of a quality job and the anticipated increase in wages that they were seeking when they first came to college. This issue became the highest focus for the college that year as the institution was at risk of losing the ability to grant federal financial aid and at the time approximately 85% of students were receiving some form of federal financial aid. Had the institution lost their ability to grant that aid, the ability for the college to remain open would have been in question; and further, a viable opportunity for a higher education within the south-central Kentucky region would have likely no longer ceased to be for many of the local residents.

As a major part of the mission for the community college is to provide access to higher education, something had to be done and quite likely multiple somethings. The college sought a two-part approach to mediating this issues at hand: first, they implemented financial aid literacy training to help students understand more fully how much that they were taking out in student loans and what the process would be once re-payment went into effect; second, the college sought to increase the graduation rates of students, or at minimum the persistence rates of students so that if they did leave the college before earning their degree they would hopefully at least have a few more semesters of completed course credits and thereby making them a more desirable candidate in an applicant pool. In order to impact the issue of persistence, and eventually graduation, the college funded the first peer mentoring program in the state. These combined efforts both proved successful, though the focus on financial education only lasted one year while the peer mentoring program became institutionalized at the college and has just recently completed its 4th year.

The initial investment of the college into the peer mentoring program was to hire 10 part-time peer mentors and due to the early success of the program, at the end of the first semester the decision was made to double the size of the program to 20 peer mentors. This totaled a $100,000.00 investment into a program that was focused on increasing the semester to semester persistence and overall retention toward graduation for all incoming students. The overall return for the investment of $100,000.00 was a 15% increase in the persistence of students that participated in the optional peer mentoring program. Further, the feeling of connectedness among students and the college also grew because of the prominent role that these peer mentors had on campus.

Identifying the Target Population to be Mentored

For SKYCTC the goal of making an impact on graduation rates was the original reason for the peer mentoring program. With that as the goal, it is logical that a college might have sought to provide additional pre-graduation counseling for students approaching their last semester or last year at the college. However, for SKYCTC the graduation rate of the institution was already over 30% and higher than the national average of community college graduates. If there were to be any further increases in graduation rates, it would require a higher number of potential eligible students to walk the stage at the end of their two years with SKYCTC. For this reason, the college selected to work with the front end of the pipeline to graduation. Attempting to reach as many of the incoming students as possible and letting them know that graduation was a legitimate option for them.

At SKYCTC the incoming students for each year was approximately 1,350 students with approximately 900 attending in the fall and 450 joining the college in the spring semesters. This targeted group of students included anyone that was required to attend a mandatory orientation process. This orientation was required for all new students and any students who had been away from the college for longer than one year. This predominately first time in college population was the selected population for the college peer mentoring program.

Identifying this group of students aligned with much of the research on peer mentoring as well. While there are successful peer mentor programs across all years of schooling, even including graduate studies, the most common population to target is that of the first semester student. In doing so the peer mentoring program is able to help the new student start their college career on the right path by helping them understand the expectations of the college and their faculty with regard to studying, participation and overall output of quality work necessary to be a successful college student. Further, the peer mentors can also help to address issues centered around creating a sense of belonging at the institution and validating the aspirations and goal of the new student as well as their ability to accomplish those goals.

Peer Mentoring Program Goals

At SKYCTC, the approach to peer mentoring was to ultimately impact the number of graduates who walked the stage at the end of two years. In order to accomplish this overall goal, the peer mentoring program focused on three primary goals and these

corelated to the encouraged three meetings that peer mentors would have with their peer mentees each semester. The goals of helping a student get to know the campus and set educational goals; helping the mentee find additional funding for their education through scholarships; and helping the mentee go into their advising meeting with a plan for how they would accomplish their second semester at the college.

The first goal of helping a student get to know the campus and set educational goals was the most important of all the goals from the perspective of the peer mentors. They viewed this goal as having the most potential impact on the student's time at SKYCTC and whether or not they would persist to a second semester. By meeting the student early in the semester, ideally before the semester started but no later than the 6th week in the semester, the peer mentors were able to help create a sense of belonging at the college. They would take this role very seriously and seek to connect the student to potential friend groups, student clubs, and student services such as financial aid that might have a significant impact on the students first semester. Further they would assist the students in identifying goals for why they were at college if they did not already have an outlined goal. The peer mentor would walk the student through a career analysis tool and help them interpret the results with regard to potential majors at the college. Additionally, they would begin to validate the abilities of the student and find common interest to allow for the relationship to develop more organically beyond the prescribed minimum of simply being there to help the new student. The more successful peer mentors prioritized relationship building in their attempts to ensure that the new student had a successful first semester.

The second goal of helping the mentee identify potential funding sources to help address the cost of attending college should be the focus of weeks 7-10. With 85% of students at SKYCTC receiving some federal aid, this was an especially important goal to ensure that the cost of attendance did not prevent the student from persisting. Peer mentors show the mentee the process for searching for and applying to local scholarships. Further, they provide any advice or guidance they can on the writing of scholarship essays, to include brainstorming sessions and grammar/editing revision recommendations.

The third goal is to assist the students in helping them to prepare for their meeting with their academic advisor. At SKYCTCC the academic advisor is a faculty member in the major of choice for the mentee. The purpose of this advising pre-meeting is to ensure that the mentee walks into the meeting with the advisor with a plan in hand and has had the additional opportunity to bounce ideas for courses off of a student who has already had the classes they are considering. Because the peer mentor is always a student who is in a similar program to the one the new mentee is considering and they are further ahead in their degree work, the peer mentor often has had experience with the combination of courses that worked or did not work for them. The peer mentor can then share this insight and encourage the student to meet with the advisor with a plan for the classes they would like so they can spend their advising session asking questions that are centered on the career of choice and what next steps are necessary in order to be successful in their given field of choice.

In all, the three meetings help to create a further sense of belonging at the institution and answer any questions that the new student might have right when they

start their first semester of college. If it were not for this approach, the student would have no prescribed contact with any resource of the college until week 10 at the earliest, unless they went to see their advisor the very first week. The peer mentor ensures that the student knows that they matter to someone at the college and that they have a cheerleader in their corner at all times.

Funding

How do the costs of the program impact our college of 3,500 students what impact might there be be if it was scaled for each of the 15 other colleges across KCTCS? The initial cost of the peer mentoring program in 201? at SKYCTC was $100,000.00, this was substantial and the largest commitment to any activity outside of the classroom at that time. This upfront support paid great dividends that returned more than the initial investment to the college.

While the annual allocation for budget only covers the cost of the peer mentors, additional funding or identified support should be determined prior to creating a program at a new college. It is recommended that the peer mentors have a coordinator for whom the responsibility of supervision, training, and assessment is a majority of their responsibility. For SKYCTC this fit well within the Office of Student Life & Engagement and the Director of Student Life & Engagement filled this role for the first 4 years of the program until a coordinator could be hired.

The determination on the number of peer mentors necessary for the college will be based on the ratio of peer mentors to students that is being sought. At SKYCTC the

original hope was for a 1:20 ratio and this occurred from the very beginning; however, with program participation optional, it was not long before the ratio was adjusted to approximately 1:40 as only a third of the initial contacts chose to participate. This ratio of forty to one potential mentees resulted in a peer mentor assisting approximately 15 students per semester in person while still maintaining electronic communication and phone calls with all 40 of their assigned mentees regardless of their active participation in the program.

Another factor to consider when considering funding is that some of the peer mentors may be eligible for federal work study. While it is my recommendation to never hire an employee solely because they have attached to them subsidized funding to pay their salary, I fully advocate hiring the best possible candidate and then, if they are eligible for federal aid, adjusting the chart string that will pay their salary. Based on work-study data in Kentucky, it is realistic to expect between 10-25% peer mentors at most KCTCS colleges will be eligible for federal work study and thus will result in a remainder of positive funds at the end of each year (cite). The college could then reallocate those funds to other needs of the campus, though I would caution not to rely on this should you ever have a semester with no federally funded work study students.

In seeking the funding from the institution, it is important to have a good idea of what the return on investment will be for the peer mentoring program. While the returns of SKYCTC are solely the experience of SKYCTC, they can provide a means by which a college could guestimate their return on investment. Based on SKYCTC enrollments, of the 1,350 first time in college students each year, approximately one third, or 450, will participate in the peer mentoring program. For these 450 students, they will realize a 15%

increase in persistence from semester to semester. For SKYCTC the persistence rate for first semester students to the second semester of study was 72% before the peer mentoring program existed. Those who participated in the program persisted at 87% (or higher in some cases). Additionally, students who participated in the program experience on average a .25 higher GPA than non-participants and took .5 more courses the following semester than non-participants. With the current tuition rate of $169/credit hour, one could expect tuition from participating students in the following semester to total $191,874, while tuition from the non-participating students would only equal $131,414, a difference of $60,460 per semester. After one full year, the resulting return on investment is a 21% increase in tuition dollars generated, more than covering the costs of the program and the other added benefit of more students persisting toward their degree. Again, persistence to degree, under the new performance based funding model could potentially reward the college with sustained or increased funding.

Hiring

When determining which peer mentors to hire, there are a few things that should be taken into consideration with regard to which types of characteristics that one should look for. Barron (2019) found that attitudes of professionalism, being relationship oriented, goal driven, studious, recognizing the need to actively connect students to resources, encouraging campus involvement and an acknowledgement of the cost of attending college were the most common attributes of high performing human levers of retention. With this in mind, the hiring process should seek to identify those individuals that either posses the majority of these traits or are poised to learn them.

When seeking an individual who is professional in their approach to their education and work, suggested questions for the interviewer to ask should relate to time management, multi-tasking, relationships within a team setting, and their approach to their own education. It is also recommended that the potential peer mentor provide a letter of recommendation from a faculty member speaking to this element of their abilities.

When seeking a student who is relationship oriented, scenarios can be used in the hiring process to determine how they would respond to different instances with students. For example, at SKYCTC a scenario bank (see Appendix A) includes questions around how a student persists in their education when they feel they are being pulled by family to do more around their house or in their community. Another scenario is in coping with a student who is indecisive about their major. If the potential peer mentor is able to relate their personal situations, or that of a friend, to that of the student in the scenario, then they would likely have the necessary relational attributes necessary to be a high performing lever of retention.

In determining if a student is goal driven, it is important to learn the potential peer mentor's aspirations. If they cannot articulate their own goals for their education, it could prove very difficult for them to help a new student identify their goals for college and thus create a sense of purpose and reason for going through the hardships that they may experience along their educational journey.

In seeking to determine if a potential peer mentor takes their studies seriously this can be determined through the grade point average (GPA) of the student and letters of

recommendation. SKYCTC has a practice of requiring a 3.0 GPA in order to be a peer mentor. While all potential mentors may not have always had a 3.0 GPA or higher, those who once had below a 3.0 GPA may be some of the better human levers of retention if they are able to relate to other students in their initial struggles but also explain how they overcame their initial hurdles to succeed in their studies.

To determine if a potential human lever of retention is able to connect their future mentees to campus resources, campus involvement, or recognize the value of their education it is recommended to seek to determine this through the use of scenarios and asking questions in how they would help their future mentees with issues around procuring a student ID, resolving questions about their financial aid, applying for scholarships, etc. If the student is able to either provide a solution for the student, know a personal resource to connect them with, or assure that they would resolve to complete the necessary research in order to be successful then they would most likely possess the required ability to have or learn how to help students with being involved on campus, connecting students to resources and ensuring that the student is not wasting their time or money in attending the college thus preventing withdrawal from frustrations.

Each of these areas are of great importance in order to ensure that the peer mentor has the ability to succeed in their potential role and ensure that the success of the program is at a high level and the college's investment into the program yields a positive return.

Training

One of the most vital parts of a peer mentoring program is that of the training that each peer mentor receives in order to be successful in their job. While it may be difficult, it is recommended that training and hiring phases occur no more that 2-3 times per year. This will allow for the entire peer mentoring team to be trained together and not require any one student to be learning on the job if they are hired in the middle of a semester. Additionally, it is recommended to post jobs for hiring on April 1st, November 1st and again if additional peer mentors are needed over the summer.

Within KCTCS it is recommended that training includes advisor professional development within PeopleSoft, or any other student data management software that is adaptable. While it is not important that the peer mentor be able to enroll students, they will need all other access that a normal advisor would be able to provide. Including the ability to look at grades, contact information, and assigned advisors. The ability to query and share this information with the mentee is of relevance, especially when it comes to the registration period of the year. It is important to know that this is not a violation of FERPA, due to the fact that the peer mentors are part-time employees of the college and not unpaid students volunteering to be peer mentors.

Training should also be provided on college resources. It cannot be taken for granted that since the peer mentor is already a student at the college that they will know every resource available at the college. It is recommended that representatives from the following areas of campus be invited to participate in a series of training days:

Department	Topic(s) to Cover in Training
Career and Academic Planning	Details on career counseling, veteran affairs and testing, as well as how students access them.
Registrar's Office	How to drop a course and apply for graduation.
Admissions and Recruiting	Recruiting basics and how to give a tour of the campus.
College Foundation	How to search for and apply to student scholarships.
Ready to Work (Grant)	What the grant offers and what students are eligible.
Work Ready (Grant)	What the grant offers and what students are eligible.
Library & Tutoring Resources	Cover the mission and focus of the library and tutoring areas as well as which subjects tutoring is available in.
Financial Aid & Business Division	How to access student billing and financials through student self-service.
Campus Bookstore	How a new students goes about getting the required textbooks.
Student Life & Engagement	How to create student ID's, campus events, and student clubs.

While this list is intended to be exhaustive, it also should be used as a starting point and tailored to each college and the campus resources that are available at that institution.

With each of the aforementioned areas presenting some amount of training on the services that they provide, it is easy to see how the training can take multiple days. This will also likely be an information overload for the peer mentors and it is recommended that scenarios be used to walk the new peer mentor through how they can assist students

to learn and connect them to each of the usable resources at the college. Further, through the use of scenarios, training can begin to focus in on how the new peer mentor can use these resources to begin to make the new mentee have a strong sense of belonging at the college. These scenarios might also be imbedded in online modules to allow for ongoing or just-in-time training. While it is important to inform the peer mentor of the desire to help the student belong, it is not necessary to go into the theory behind the practice, as it is more important that the practice be accomplished than the theory known.

Auxiliary Responsibilities

In addition to being a peer mentor at the college, the peer mentor program may also be asked to do more than be a coach or guide to the incoming students. The role can adjust to meet the needs of the college, but it would not be uncommon for the peer mentors to begin to be the face of students at the college. Since so many of the new students will easily connect to the peer mentors, this "face of the college" role is a logical next step. This may take place through the use of peer mentors as a welcoming committee and tour guides within orientation or when special guests come to the college. If the college is fortunate to have its own ambassador program that is great but knowing some of the financial outlooks for many of the 16 KCTCS colleges, this is likely to fall to the peer mentoring group at many campuses.

Additionally, if the peer mentors are able to, it is an ideal situation to allow their participation in student life events whenever possible. By helping to create and facilitate the events, the peer mentor begins to take ownership for more of campus life at the

institution and it allows them to encourage a greater sense of belonging and personal sense of mattering at the college. Further, it provides the peer mentor with the opportunity to invite their mentee to a campus event that the peer mentor had some part in creating or facilitating, broadening the impact of the peer mentoring program at the college.

Measurement

In order to ensure the success of the program it is important to measure the program and report regularly on the persistence and retention generated from the program. This will help to justify the cost of the program and allow the college to determine if the program requires more peer mentors to have a greater impact, or if the program was not a success at the institution.

In the process of measurement, it is important to first have a baseline for what you will be measuring against. It is recommended that the first semester persistence rate from semester to semester be known. For SKYCTC this is the baseline of 72% from which the college is able to see the impact for those that participate in the program and the increase was an additional 15%. This will likely differ from college to college and should be information that the institutional research office of the college can provide.

Another baseline number to know before beginning is what the average GPA of the first semester student is. At SKYCTC this was approximately a 2.70 at the end of the first semester. For participants in the program, their GPA was on average .25 higher than non-participants, resulting in a 2.95 GPA at the end of the first semester.

Additionally, the average number of classes taken during the second semester for those that persist is an excellent baseline to have in mind. For SKYCTC this was approximately 2.5 classes per semester or 7.5 credit hours for their second semester. A large indicator of the success of the program was found in the increase to 9 credit hours per semester for those that participated, directly translating to additional revenue from the increase number of students that persisted. This again will vary from college to college and is easily accessible through your institutional research office.

Once the baseline numbers are known, the next things that are recommended to measure is the participation rates and how peer mentors and mentees participate in the program. This can be monitored through a simple usage of Microsoft Forms or similar survey software to record data after every contact that the peer mentor has with their mentee. It is recommended that the following be tracked through this method: type of meeting/contact and whether the meeting/contact took place in person, over the phone, or via email; meeting topic and whether it focused on goal setting and welcoming the college to the camps, scholarship research and application, or general advising preparation and ensuring the student is ready for their advising meeting. By tracking these areas, a coordinator can quickly see the effectiveness of each peer mentor and provide individualized training on areas in which they are lacking.

By tracking and measuring these areas as well as the baseline numbers, at the end of each semester the coordinator can work with their institutional research office to determine if the peer mentoring did indeed move the needle on persistence and success at the college. Peer mentoring is a proven successful lever of retention, and these efforts

will make an impact on the success of the college, to the degree that these successes are realized at each institution will vary.

Conclusion

While peer mentoring has a proven track record of success within higher education, community colleges, and most locally SKYCTC, how this looks at each of the colleges in KCTCS will differ. However, it is the hope of the author that this lever of retention be implemented statewide and allow for the potential to increase persistence and success for all 80,000 plus students that are a part of KCTCS. If all first-time students were to receive a peer mentor and experience a similar modicum of success, what could the impact on the State of Kentucky be! There would be more students succeeding in the community college, earning their degrees and going on to be gainfully employed and successful within our state.

Further, if there were more peer mentoring programs across the state, another side benefit is the graduation rates of the peer mentor themselves, 100% of the peer mentors at SKYCTC have graduated. Not only is this kind of program an effective use of existing resources, but it can be an effective high impact educational practice for the participating students and an important mechanism for improving overall campus culture. Most importantly, in this era of performance based funding, it is critical to improve the performance of as many students as possible and peer mentoring can be the lever of retention that encourages improvement for all students.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

While the impact of the lever of retention in peer mentoring is one that is well researched and without question, it is the story of the individuals pulling the levers that is truly unique in this scenario. Their dedication to seeing other students be successful and accomplish their goals of a higher education is one that is both without question and often unparalleled. Through their stories I learned that no one will go to bat for a student quite like the peer mentor of that student. It is almost as if they become their adopted child from the time they are assigned to their mentee list. They do everything that they can to ensure the success of their child and even at times can boarder on the edge of being the helicopter parent that those of us in higher education so dearly love. Regardless of their delivery though, the devotion to the mentees success rang true with every peer mentor interviewed. The skills, practices, and attitudes that were implemented varied, yet the results were predominately the same, continued success for the student. As KCTCS, or other colleges, seek to prepare for the future of 100% performance based funding, they would be foolish not to consider the impact that peer mentoring can have on the education of a new student.

Further, the overwhelming overlap between the practices and attitudes of the peer mentors and those of the faculty member should not go unnoticed. If the community college can hire and train for the desired skill sets expressed in this research, the impact on student persistence and retention is one that could truly be impactful. To idealize an institution that searches for, hires, and trains for peer mentors and faculty that intentionally exhibit the attributes of these human levers of retention that our research

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was conducted on is not only an institute that I would love to work for, it is also one that will surely make its way quickly to the top of the community college circles.

Reflections

As I enter my 14th year in higher education and community colleges, I am pleased with the work that I have accomplished to date. My personal continuance of my education has taught me many things and most importantly is that the work that we endeavor to accomplish in the name of student success is always worth the fight, headaches, or whatever else may come one's way. Working with peer mentors at times has been and will be the most frustrating part of mine or any professional's job as you help to guide and mold a new group of students every year. However, this research, and sitting down for hours with the wonderful student practitioners that I had the pleasure to interview assured me that the work is beyond worth it. To hear their stories of trials that they have overcome and how they have in turn used those stories and experiences for the betterment of their students that they mentor, assures me of the power of peer mentoring, beyond what shows up on paper. Hearing of how an 18 year old can mentor a 66 year old and develop a true friendship that goes beyond simply work is truly amazing. For the now over 70 peer mentors that I have worked with in my career at multiple locations, I thank you. Each of you has taught me and so many more. I am so fortunate to have been blessed to have attended a community college when I graduated high school, and I am even more fortunate that I have chosen to call community colleges my profession.

Appendix I: Informed Consent Forms
RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title:	Sponsors:
It's Not the Programs; It's the People: Building Human Levers of Retention in Community Colleges	Dr. Jane Jensen
	Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation
	University of Kentucky
Principal Investigators:	Organization:
Kyle Barron	University of Kentucky College of Education
Kimberly Russell	
	Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation
	Lexington, KY 40506
Location: Lexington, KY	Phone: 859 257-1929

1. **PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY**

    You are being invited to take part in a research study designed to look at the experiences of grassroots leaders in higher education. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about five people to do so. Kyle Barron or Kimberly Russell will be the Principal Investigators (PI) for this study. They are being guided in this research by Dr. Jane Jensen of the University of Kentucky, Department of Educational Policy. By doing this study, we hope to gain insight into the characteristics that create successful human levers of retention.

2. **PROCEDURES**

    The research procedures will be conducted at Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKYCTC) or West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC). The PI will contact you via email and telephone to arrange an interview time. You will be asked to answer questions regarding how you are a human lever of retention.

3. **POSSIBLE RISKS**

Risks to participating in this research study are unknown. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. However, any new information developed during the study that may affect your willingness to continue participation will be communicated to you.

4. **POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

There are no known benefits from taking part in this study. Your participation will allow for a greater understanding of the characteristics, motivations, and actions of human levers of retention in a higher education setting.

5. **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study. There is no financial compensation for your participation in this research.

6. **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your identity in this study will be treated as confidential. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what that information is. Your information will be combined with other people taking part in the study. The results of the study may be published to share with other researchers, but we will not give your name or include any identifiable references to you.

7. **TERMINATION OR RESEARCH STUDY**

You may voluntarily choose not to participate in this study or withdraw at any time. You will not be treated any differently for deciding not to participate or for deciding to withdraw.

8. **AVAILABLE SOURCE OF INFORMATION**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please do not hesitate to contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll-free at 1-866-400-9428.

9. **AUTHORIZATION**

I have read and understand this consent form and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local laws.

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____   Date: _____

Appendix II: Human Lever of Retention (Faculty) Study Participant Identification

In a review and synthesis of literature on the subject of the role of faculty in student success, a number of common characteristics and behaviors were identified. Please consider the following characteristics and behaviors and provide the names of general education faculty members who, based upon your observation and experience, most consistently and completely meet the criteria listed below. You may also consider your own work as a faculty member and include your own name on your list. Deans, please note that faculty members do not have to be members of your academic division. However, they should be faculty members who teach primarily general education/transfer courses.

- Promotes and communicates high academic expectations that are clear and consistent (Tinto, 2012; Kinzie, 2005; Shelton, 2003; Pascarella, 2011)

- Is open to feedback from students regarding classroom practices (Kinzie, 2005)

- Provides timely, frequent, and meaningful feedback to students regarding academic performance (Tinto, 2012; Kinzie, 2005)

- Promotes academic and social engagement in the classroom for student (Tinto, 1997; Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton and Mundy, 2011; Braxton et al., 2008)

- Appears to view teaching as a vocation or "calling" rather than as a "job" (DuBois, 1993; Corbin, 1998)

- Collaborates with colleagues to develop more effective instruction, assessments, policies, and/or interventions (Outcalt, 2000)

- Uses data to set goals, monitor progress, and improve practice (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010)

- Maintains standards while affirming that all students can learn (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010)

- Builds formal and informal mentoring relationships with students (Fuentes et al., 2013; Komarraju et al., 2010)

- Serves as a resource for students (Komarraju et al.m 2010; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Tinto, 2012)

- Engages in ongoing faculty development/professional development related to teaching and student engagement (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)

- Provides quality academic advising to help students define goals, navigate college policies and procedures, and (if applicable) understand the transfer process (McArthur, 2005; Roberts and Styron, 2010)

- Demonstrates respect for students (Hoffman, 2014)

- Demonstrates compassion and concern for students on and off campus (Hoffman, 2014; Darling, 2015; Braxton, 2004; Braxton et al., 2008; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)

- Engages in informal interactions with students outside of the classroom (Komorraju et al., 2010)

- Replies to student communications in a timely manner (Hoffman, 2014)

- Experiments with engaging pedagogy and shares work with colleagues (Stevenson et al., 2006)

- Helps students successfully transition into college (Goldrick-Rab, 2007; Dixon-Rayle and Chung, 2007; Komarraju et al., 2010; Schlossberg, 1989; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)

- Helps students to develop strong networks on campus with peers, faculty, and staff (Tinto, 1993; Dixon-Rayle and Chung, 2007; Braxton et al., 2000)

- Helps students to feel that they matter to the college (Scholssberg, 1989; Dixon-Rayle and Chung, 2007; Shelly, 2014)

- Promotes academic integration of students by promoting active and collaborative learning in the classroom (Tinto, 1997; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Braxton et al., 2008; Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Lundberg, 2014;)

- Provides procedural assistance to students who require it (Lundberg, 2014)

- Helps student to find their purpose (Roberts and Styron, 2010)

- Provides and/or communicates with students opportunities for social engagement on campus (Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1997; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Braxton, 2004)

- Is both approachable and available to students inside and outside of class (Kuh et al., 2005; DuBois, 1993)

- Creates both valuable and enriching learning experiences for students (Roberts and Styron, 2010; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)

- Demonstrates knowledge of campus support programs and encourages students to take advantage of support programs (Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Styron and Roberts, 2010)

- Exhibits a strong command and organization of the subject being taught (Pascarella et al., 2011; DuBois, 1993)

- Demonstrates enthusiasm about the discipline and the class (DuBois, 1993; Pascarella et al., 2011)

- Derives and demonstrates satisfaction from successes of students (Corbin, 1998)

- Connects content knowledge and educational experiences with the rest of students' lives (Richmond, 1986; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005).

- Demonstrates knowledge of common characteristics and barriers that put students at risk for attrition (Kuh et al., 2005; Darling, 2015;)

- Assists students with monitoring their academic progress (Darling, 2015)

- Helps students develop a sense of belonging on campus (Jacoby, 2000; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005)

- Clearly identifies for students what they need to know and be able to do in order to successfully complete course work (Kinzie, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2011)

- Builds on students' prior knowledge, experiences, abilities, and talents in instruction (Kinzie, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005)

- Demonstrates a genuine interest in students and their success (Shelton 2003)

Please list names of faculty members you feel best reflect these characteristics and behaviors below.

Appendix III: Nomination Form for Faculty Participation

First, please read through the entire list and then select individuals to nominate.   These may be faculty members in your division who teach at least one general education course (or FYE course) or faculty members outside your division who teach at least one general education course (or FYE course). There is no maximum number nor minimum number of faculty you can nominate.

Please consider which behaviors and characteristics you have observed in each high performing potential lever of retention and/or which you are aware of due to evidence such as student evaluations of instruction, "word of mouth," or other means of communication. The criteria listed below were collected from a review of literature focusing on the impact/role of faculty in student retention. Please let me know if you have any questions. Your responses will be kept confidential and are used strictly for identifying participants, not for data collection purposes. Thank you for your participation!

- Promotes and communicates high academic expectations that are clear and consistent (Tinto, 2012; Kinzie, 2005; Shelton, 2003; Pascarella, 2011)
- Is open to feedback from students regarding classroom practices (Kinzie, 2005)
- Provides timely, frequent, and meaningful feedback to students regarding academic performance (Tinto, 2012; Kinzie, 2005)
- Promotes academic and social engagement in the classroom for student (Tinto, 1997; Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton and Mundy, 2011; Braxton et al., 2008)
- Appears to view teaching as a vocation or "calling" rather than as a "job" (DuBois, 1993; Corbin, 1998)
- Collaborates with colleagues to develop more effective instruction, assessments, policies, and/or interventions (Outcalt, 2000)
- Uses data to set goals, monitor progress, and improve practice (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010)
- Maintains standards while affirming that all students can learn (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010)
- Builds formal and informal mentoring relationships with students (Fuentes et al., 2013; Komarraju et al., 2010)
- Serves as a resource for students (Komarraju et al.m 2010; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Tinto, 2012)
- Engages in ongoing faculty development/professional development related to teaching and student engagement (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)

- Provides quality academic advising to help students define goals, navigate college policies and procedures, and (if applicable) understand the transfer process (McArthur, 2005; Roberts and Styron, 2010)
- Demonstrates respect for students (Hoffman, 2014)
- Demonstrates compassion and concern for students on and off campus (Hoffman, 2014; Darling, 2015; Braxton, 2004; Braxton et al., 2008; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)
- Engages in informal interactions with students outside of the classroom (Komorraju et al., 2010)
- Replies to student communications in a timely manner (Hoffman, 2014)
- Experiments with engaging pedagogy and shares work with colleagues (Stevenson et al., 2006)
- Takes a "talent development" approach in advising (Stevenson et al., 2006; Richmond, 1986)
- Helps students successfully transition into college (Goldrick-Rab, 2007; Dixon-Rayle and Chung, 2007; Komarraju et al., 2010; Schlossberg, 1989; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)
- Helps students to develop strong networks on campus with peers, faculty, and staff (Tinto, 1993; Dixon-Rayle and Chung, 2007; Braxton et al., 2000)
- Helps students to feel that they matter to the college (Scholssberg, 1989; Dixon-Rayle and Chung, 2007; Shelly, 2014)
- Promotes academic integration of students by promoting active and collaborative learning in the classroom (Tinto, 1997; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Braxton et al., 2008; Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Lundberg, 2014;)
- Provides procedural assistance to students who require it (Lundberg, 2014)
- Helps student to find their purpose (Roberts and Styron, 2010)
- Provides and/or communicates with students opportunities for social engagement on campus (Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1997; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Braxton, 2004)
- Is both approachable and available to students inside and outside of class (Kuh et al., 2005; DuBois, 1993)
- Creates both valuable and enriching learning experiences for students (Roberts and Styron, 2010; Braxton and Mundy, 2001)
- Demonstrates knowledge of campus support programs and encourages students to take advantage of support programs (Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Styron and Roberts, 2010)
- Exhibits a strong command and organization of the subject being taught (Pascarella et al., 2011; DuBois, 1993)

- Demonstrates enthusiasm about the discipline and the class (DuBois, 1993; Pascarella et al., 2011)
- Motivates students to set and reach goals (DuBois, 1993)
- Derives and demonstrates satisfaction from successes of students (Corbin, 1998)
- Connects content knowledge and educational experiences with the rest of students' lives (Richmond, 1986; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005).
- Demonstrates knowledge of common characteristics and barriers that put students at risk for attrition (Kuh et al., 2005; Darling, 2015;)
- Assists students with monitoring their academic progress (Darling, 2015)
- Helps students develop a sense of belonging on campus (Jacoby, 2000; Braxton and Mundy, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005)
- Clearly identifies for students what they need to know and be able to do in order to successfully complete course work (Kinzie, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2011)
- Builds on students' prior knowledge, experiences, abilities, and talents in instruction (Kinzie, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005)
- Demonstrates a genuine interest in students and their success (Shelton 2003)

Appendix IV: Interview Guides

Interview Guide for Faculty

Interview #1 (Background Information)

1. Current professional role
   A. What do you teach?
   B. How long have you been teaching this subject?
   C. How long have you been at WKCTC?
   D. Briefly describe your responsibilities including instruction, advising, internal service, special projects, leaderships, etc.

2. Background as a student
   A. Describe your approach to your own studies throughout your own education
   B. How would your teachers and peers have described you?
   C. What were your strengths and weaknesses as a student? Best subjects? Worst?
   D. Who were your role models and mentors as a student? How did they help you?
   E. What challenges did you face as a student?
   F. Describe your college experience. What do you remember about the transition, the difficulties, the most helpful/influential forces for you?
   G. What other careers did you consider?

3. Professional pathway questions
   A. Educational background and schools attended
   B. Choice of major
   C. Path to community college
   D. Prior experience with community college
   E. What would you do professionally if you didn't do this?

Interview #2 (Community College and Working with Students)

1. Questions regarding the community college
   A. What was your view of the community college when you arrived?
   B. What do you consider the role of the community college for students? For society?
   C. How would you describe the student body at your college?

2. Teaching in the community college
   A. What do you see as the role of the faculty member in a community college?
   B. What are the challenges you face as a community college faculty member?
   C. What are the personal and professional benefits of teaching at a community college?
   D. What qualities should an effective community college faculty member possess?
   E. What qualities should a "human lever of retention" possess?
   F. Do you intentionally consider your role in the retention process, and how does this affect your daily work?

G. How would your students describe you?

H. How would your advisees describe you?

3. Non-completion issues
    A. What kinds of academic challenges do your students face?
    B. What kinds of non-academic challenges do your students face?
    C. For what reasons do students fail your courses or fail to complete your courses? For what reasons do you observe students failing or failing to complete other courses?
    D. Describe how you feel when students do not successfully complete your course.

4. Retention efforts
    A. What strategies have you observed on the part of the institution and on the part of your colleagues to support retention?
    B. What do you feel are the most successful approaches to supporting retention?
    C. What do you feel is your role in supporting student retention?
    D. In your view, what is the importance of student retention?
    E. You have been identified as a "lever of retention". Why do you think this is the case? What do you think might set you apart from some of your colleagues?
    F. In the classroom, how do you specifically and intentionally support student persistence?
    G. Outside of the classroom, how do you specifically and intentionally support student persistence?
    H. If you had to choose one thing to be the single most effective practice you have in terms of retention, what would it be?
    I. In what ways do you feel that you have improved as a faculty member and as a lever since you began your career?
    J. What motivates you to go "above and beyond?"
    K. How has the institution helped to support you as a lever of retention?
    L. In what ways does the institution make it more difficult to be a lever of retention?
    M. If you could make adjustments to your job that would allow you to better serve students, what would those be? Why?
    N. How might institutions better prepare faculty members to be levers of retention?

5. Questionnaire Reflection
    A. Looking over your responses to the questionnaire, can you discuss the factors you noted as most important?
    B. Which items reflect your greatest strengths as a faculty member?
    C. What items would you add to the questionnaire?

6. PPE Reflection

    A. How do you decide what types of activities to include on your PPE?

B. What items on your PPE do you consider your most significant achievements or plans? What on your PPE makes you proud?
C. Are there things in your PPE that perhaps set you apart from your colleagues? If so, what?
D. What activities outlined in your PPE do you feel are most impactful on student success and completion?

Interview Guide for Students

Interview #1 (Background Information)

1. Current professional role
   A. What are you majoring in?
   B. How long have you been studying this subject?
   C. How long have you been at SKYCTC?
   D. Briefly describe your responsibilities as a student and peer mentor, and any other contributions you make on the campus

2. Background as a student
   A. Describe your approach to your studies throughout your education
   B. How would your teachers and peers describe you?
   C. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a student? Best subjects? Worst? Characteristic traits?
   D. Who are your role models and mentors as a student? How do they help you?
   E. What challenges do you face as a student?
   F. Describe your college experience. What do/will you remember about the transition from high school to college, the difficulties, the most helpful/influential forces for you?
   G. What career are you considering?

4. Professional pathway questions
   A. Educational background and schools attended
   B. Choice of major
   C. Path to community college
   D. Prior experience with community college
   E. What would you do professionally if you didn't do this?
   F. Questions regarding the community college
   G. What was your view of the community college when you arrived?
   H. What do you consider the role of the community college for students? For society?
   I. How would you describe the student body at your college?
   J. What motivated you to become a peer mentor?

Interview #2 (Community College and Mentoring Students)

1. Mentoring in the community college
   A. What do you see as the role of the Student Ambassador in a community college?
   B. How does this role differ, in your view, from the faculty member as a student mentor?
   C. What are the challenges you face as a Student Ambassador?
   D. What are the personal and professional benefits of being a Student Ambassador at a community college?
   E. What qualities should an effective Student Ambassador possess?

F. What qualities should a "human lever of retention" possess? (provide the participant with a definition)
G. Do you intentionally consider your role in the retention process, and how does this affect your daily work?
H. Of your colleagues, whom do you consider your mentors or role models? What have you learned from them?
I. What qualities, attitudes, and behaviors do you feel would be beneficial for your colleagues to emulate?
J. How would your mentees describe you?
K. How would your co-workers describe you?

2. Non-completion issues
   A. What kinds of academic challenges do your mentees face?
   B. What kinds of non-academic challenges do your mentees face?
   C. For what reasons do mentees fail courses or fail to complete courses?
   D. For what reasons do you observe students failing or failing to complete other courses?
   E. Describe how you feel when mentees do not successfully re-enroll for the next semester.

3. Retention efforts
   A. What strategies have you observed on the part of the institution and on the part of your colleagues to support retention?
   B. What do you feel are the most successful approaches to supporting retention?
   C. What do you feel is your role in supporting student retention?
   D. In your view, what is the importance of student retention?
   E. How do you specifically and intentionally support student persistence out of the classroom?
   F. How do you specifically and intentionally support student persistence in the classroom?
   G. If you had to choose one thing to be the single most effective practice you have in terms of retention, what would it be?
   H. Provide examples of particular scenarios in which you served as a "lever of retention"
   I. In what ways do you feel that you have improved as a Student Ambassador and as a lever since you began your position?
   J. You have been identified as a high impact "lever of retention". Why do you think this is the case? What do you think might set you apart from some of your colleagues?
   K. What motivates you to go "above and beyond?"
   L. How has the institution helped to support you as a lever of retention?
   M. In what ways does the institution make it more difficult to be a lever of retention?

N. If you could make adjustments to your job that would allow you to better serve students, what would those be? Why?
O. How can others become more effective levers of retention?
P.   How might institutions better prepare Student Ambassadors to be levers of retention?

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Vita

Education

Master of Education, College of Education, University of North Texas, 2011
        Concentration: Higher Education

Bachelor of Applied Arts and Science, University of North Texas, 2009

Associate of Arts, Richland College, Dallas, Texas 2007

Professional Positions

Assistant Vice President for Student Services, Volunteer State Community College, Gallatin, Tennessee, April 2019 to present.

Director of Student Life and Engagement, Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College, Bowling Green, Kentucky, August 2014 to April 2019.

Specialist IV, Coordinator of QEP- Year One Engagement, Eastfield College, Dallas, Texas, April 2013 to August 2014.

Interim Dean of Student Engagement and Retention, Eastfield College, Dallas, Texas, August 2013 to January 2014.

Professional Support Staff President, Dallas County Community College District and Richland College, Dallas, Texas, September 2007 to August 2013.

Coordinator of Community Engagement Programs, Richland College, Dallas, Texas, August 2012 to March 2013.

Administrative Assistant to the Instructional Dean, Richland College, Dallas, Texas, June 2006 to July 2012.

Academic Advisor, Richland College, Dallas, Texas, July 2009 to September 2010.

Adjunct Instructor for Year One Engage, Eastfield College, Dallas, Texas, April 2013 to August 2014.

Adjunct Instructor for Continuing Education and Workforce Development, Richland College, Dallas, Texas, May 2007 to May 2008.

Professional Development Instructor for Intercultural Competency, Richland College, Dallas Texas, September 2010 to August 2013

Scholastic and Professional Honors

Graduate of the McCall Leadership Academy for Kentucky Community and Technical College System, 2015.

Administrator of the Year for Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College, 2015.

John & Suanne Rouche Excellence Award Recipient from League for Innovation, 2015.

Publications

Neal, P., Napoles, G.F., McCaslin, J., Justice, B., White, D., Barron, K. (2014). Reaching the TOP: Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University's joint admission program. *Kentucky Transfer Monograph: Beyond the Glass*. Kentucky Community and Technical College System.

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