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Navigating the obstacles of college transition: student perceptions of advising offered in the context of a community-college success course

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Navigating the obstacles of college transition: student perceptions of advising offered in the context of a community-college success course

By

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NAVIGATING THE OBSTACLES OF COLLEGE TRANSITION: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ADVISING OFFERED IN THE CONTEXT OF A COMMUNITY-COLLEGE SUCCESS COURSE

By Michele Charon Pavitt, M.A.

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Catherine Fallona

Community college graduation rates have grown increasingly concerning because the changing economy demands post-secondary credentials for up to two thirds of all jobs (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Numerous studies have indicated that advising is a critical tool that can effectively support students' academic persistence (Grites & Gordon, 2000; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Light, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Building upon this research, the present study explored student perceptions of an advising model offered in the context of the student-success course. The study was designed to show the range of impact of the advising model, based on students' levels of incoming barriers and their varied degrees of participation in the advising program. Secondly, the study explored how the advising experience influenced participants' overall transition-to-college experiences, if at all.

The qualitative study's findings indicate that even participants with the highest levels of incoming barriers experienced meaningful support through the advising model. Most of the six participants viewed the advising experience as beneficial since it contributed toward a welcoming atmosphere, provided academic-planning guidance, connected students to a network of support, and enhanced students' self-confidence. Participants viewed the advisor as a member of a wider network of faculty, staff, and peers who influenced their transition-to-college experiences. Participants also described a sense of personal transformation that colored their first-year experience. While some described it as an expansion of their academic interests, others pointed to a growing sense of identity as a student, personal sense of agency, or expanded social connection.

The study's findings suggest a range of adaptations to existing advising models. Most models, including prescriptive, developmental, proactive, advising-as-teaching, sense-of-belonging, and validation, focus primarily on the one-to-one relationship between advisee and advisor. Key findings of the study suggest that a wider lens should be used to interpret the relationship: A primary feature of the advising role is to help the student connect with a wider network of faculty, staff, and peers. Advisors also should be counseled to watch for signs of personal transformation among college students. Noticing and supporting this nascent sense of personal change could provide the vital support needed to help students to persevere toward academic achievement.

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There are advantages to embarking on a PhD later in life. My kids helped me study math for the GRE, shared tips on creating poster presentations in PowerPoint, and reminded me that Google Scholar generates pretty accurate APA citations. They took it in stride when I disappeared to my room to work on a draft rather than joining them for canoeing on Rangeley Lake or hiking in a national park near Tuscon. They also realized that their contribution to my project was dwarfed by the unwavering support of my husband, their dad. I cannot thank him enough and have lately resorted to Google searches of how to nominate someone for a Nobel Prize. You see, it isn't just that he makes my favorite-in-the-world fish chowder. He also offers priceless support as my home-based IT Help Desk and insists on doing all the food shopping, laundry, and errands while I spend entire weekends at my desk.

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And last but of course the most important – the student participants. These brave, talented, insightful individuals shared their own "lived experience" of a highly challenging transition. They spoke of addiction, poverty, loss, and fear. Within just one short year of their remarkable lives, they navigated a passage from frightened youthfulness to purposeful professionals-in-the-making. I appreciate their time, honesty, and wisdom.

To all these people, I offer my heartfelt appreciation. My only wish now is to use the skills I have learned to contribute toward solutions to the persistent problems plaguing higher education. May every student receive the support they need to use education as a life-changing force to grow in ways they never dreamed possible.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

In higher-education scholarship, more attention has been devoted to the topic of college retention than nearly any other issue (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2012). Studied for more than a century, the attrition rate of college students has recently become a highly concerning phenomenon since post-secondary education is increasingly becoming a requirement for jobs in the post-great recession economy (Bean, 1980; Lumina Foundation, 2019). Those who drop out of college face greater risk for unemployment, low-wage earnings, and associated social repercussions (Autor, 2014).

Student retention is especially concerning at community colleges, where graduation rates lag behind those of four-year colleges (CCRC, 2019). The community-college student population also includes more persons of color, students of lower socio-economic status, and those who are the first in their families to attend college. These students face increased barriers to persistence including the need to work full-time while enrolled in college or a responsibility to care for family members (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009).

> According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, among first-time college students who enrolled in a community college in the fall of 2012 either part-time or full-time, 39.2 percent earned a credential from a two- or four-year institution within six years. That figure excludes dual enrollment students. (CCRC, 2019, para. 6)

Social and economic trends have generated renewed interest in the issue of student retention within the past ten years. The United States' ranking for higher-

education completion has dropped compared to other industrialized nations. While it once held first-place standing, it has decreased to 11th place in the world, after such countries as South Korea, Norway, New Zealand, Japan, France, and others (Lumina Foundation, 2019).

Globalization of the economy is eliminating jobs that required only a high-school degree, therefore putting more pressure on citizens to earn a college degree (Lumina Foundation, 2019). About four out of five jobs lost in the U.S. during the recent recession, starting in 2008, were those requiring only a high-school diploma. Economic analysts do not expect such jobs to return. In fact, by 2020, two-thirds of all U.S. jobs are expected to require some form of post-secondary education (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Therefore, students who drop out of college before completing an associate or bachelor's degree may find it challenging to secure full-time employment that will pay a living wage.

A typical high-school graduate can be expected to earn a total of about $600,000 over a lifetime as compared to $1.2 million, about double the total salary, for an individual holding a bachelor's degree (Rippner, 2016). Over the past thirty years, the earnings disparity between these two groups has more than doubled, according to one researcher.

Dropouts, high school graduates, and people with some college but no degree are on the down escalator of social mobility, falling out of the middle-income class and into the lower three deciles of family income. In 1970, almost half (46 percent) of high school dropouts were in the middle class. By 2007, the share of

dropouts in the middle class had fallen to 33 percent. (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 3)

These trends are reflected in graduation rates for New England community colleges. Only 6% of the 2012 cohort of students enrolled in a group of mid-sized New England community colleges graduated in two years or "normal time," according to the IPEDS Data Feedback Report (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). The "150 percent of normal time," or three-year graduation rate for the colleges was 17% and "200 percent of normal time" or four-year graduation rate was 24% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Thus, four years after matriculating at these community colleges, 76% of students had not completed what is commonly known as a "two-year degree."

Levels of college debt also contribute to concerns over these low graduation rates. Overall college debt has increased by about 19% over the past decade; 60% of current graduates of four-year institutions held an average of $27,300 debt (Rippner, 2016). Levels of debt were generally lower for students who did not complete college, but the combined effects of poor job prospects and responsibility to pay college loans has proven highly challenging. "Compared with students who borrowed and attained a bachelor's degree, those who borrowed and dropped out were more than twice as likely to be unemployed six years later" (Gladieux, 2005 p. 2).

As of fall, 2013, 9% of those who left college with accumulated debt were in default, and nearly one half of students in this category had attended for-profit colleges and universities. "Graduate students and undergraduates who borrow to attend selective colleges have the largest debts and the lowest default rates. Students who attend for-

profit and public two-year colleges have the smallest debts and the highest default rates" (Trends in Student Aid, 2017, para. 1). The likelihood of defaulting on college loans is also higher for those who do not graduate (Gladieux, 2005). Of the borrowers who earned bachelor's degrees, only 2% were in default in 2001; for those who dropped out, however, 22% were in default on one or more loans in the same year.

Barriers for Community-college Students

Greater challenges are associated with college completion for community-college students as compared with their four-year-college peers. A higher percentage of community-college students face barriers such as financial hardship, academic unpreparedness for college, a need for employment while enrolled in school, and responsibility to care for family members (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009). Horn and Nevill (2006) found a higher prevalence of students of low socio-economic status at community colleges than at four-year institutions of higher education. "Compared with students attending four-year colleges, community college students are more likely to be older, female, Black or Hispanic, and from low-income families" (p. iv).

They also reported that while 20% of students of four-year colleges were African-American or Hispanic, about 30% of community college enrollees were students of color. Compared to their four-year-college peers, they required at least one more "developmental," or remedial college class during their first semester (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009).

The lower socio-economic status of community college students also translated into a higher need for employment while enrolled. Community college students were more likely to select part-time college schedules due to their need for employment and to

care for family members. (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). Part-time enrollment was far more common at community colleges than at four-year institutions and has been correlated with lower graduation rates (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017). Among the reasons for part-time enrollment were the responsibilities to care for family members.

> Demographically, part-time students are more likely to be female and to be employed full-time. Thus, part time students are more likely than full-time students to have competing demands from work and children that may displace study time. (McCann, Fogarty, & Roberts, 2012, para. 10)

Thus, a variety of obstacles including financial need, greater likelihood of full-time employment, family responsibilities, and lack of academic preparedness made persistence more difficult for community-college students.

Institutional Efforts to Raise Completion Rates

Zwerling (1980) investigated the role of the institution in enhancing community college retention. "To reduce significantly the staggering attrition at the average community college, it appears necessary to shift the focus from what is wrong with the student to what is wrong with the institution" (p. 56). In Zwerling's view, institutional factors that can positively impact retention include providing adequate academic advising at times that are convenient for students. Wild and Ebbers (2002) added that in order for community colleges to effectively address issues of student persistence, they need to clarify their own retention goals, identify strategies for meeting those goals, and use institutional data to guide their decisions (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

Studies have also demonstrated that effective academic advising is critical for low-income and first-generation students who may be unfamiliar with college-related language or policies, and who often rely on assistance from teachers or counselors rather than family members (Swecker et al., 2013). "Some researchers recommend that proactive (formerly called *intrusive*) advising be used with at-risk students because it places the responsibility on the advisor, rather than the student, for making the initial contact and establishing the advising relationship" (Swecker et al., 2013, para. 11).

Research has shown that student success courses provide effective instruction and peer-support for students, especially at community colleges. A number of studies indicate that students find the courses to be useful sources of information about academic strategies and institutional policies (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993; Stovall, 2000). Many researchers note that the goals of the student success course align closely with those of first-year advising and that these two efforts provide a promising opportunity for institutional collaboration (Hunter, Henscheid, & Mouton, 2007).

> Although the traditional literature about student affairs assigns student affairs professionals the responsibility of students' social and emotional development and faculty responsibility for the intellectual development of students, it has become apparent in recent years that the academic side and student affairs side of campus must work together. (Kellogg, 1999, p. 2)

One intervention widely used by colleges and universities across the country involves collaboration between faculty and student-affairs staff within the context of an academic course. Over the past decade, researchers have pointed out that the objectives of the first-year seminar (also referred to as the student-success course) and first-year

academic advising are similar in many ways and that collaboration between faculty and staff in these areas would be beneficial (Hunter, Henscheid, & Mouton, 2007).

> Community college First-Year Experience (FYE) programs include student and academic support services that can enhance student success during the first year in college. FYE activities are often embedded in course content, and include co-curricular activities that help students navigate their first year of college. (Dale & Drake, 2005, p. 58)

Evidence to support the beneficial effects of faculty-staff collaboration in the student-success course (SSC) is largely anecdotal. Researchers have called for new studies to explore students' experience of college transition and how interactions with faculty and staff influence students' engagement in learning (Kuh & Banta, 2000; Kellogg, 1999; Hunter, Henscheid, & Mouton, 2007; O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009; Schuetz 2008). The current qualitative study addressed such gaps in the literature by analyzing students' perceptions of their advising experience provided in the context of an SSC at a New England community college. Participants' incoming barriers to higher education, levels of engagement, ongoing obstacles, connection to networks of support, and advising experiences were explored through the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an advising experience offered within the context of a student-success course.

Research Questions

1. What were community-college students' perceptions of their advising experience provided within the context of their success course?

2. How were students' overall college transition experiences influenced, if at all, by their advising experience?

Significance of the Study

Although institutional reports of advising offered in the context of a student success course (SSC) have been common within the past decade, a dearth of quantitative or qualitative studies have been conducted on this and other forms of collaboration between faculty and student-affairs staff.

> Comprehensive research has not yet been conducted to ascertain the outcomes of the focus on student learning and the increased collaboration taking place on campuses all over the country. However, there are many desired outcomes, some of which include improved cognitive, interpersonal and organization skills; self-discipline, self-understanding, and responsibility for self and community; increased leadership and citizenship; academic success; and retention. (Kellogg, 1999, p. 4)

Researchers have also noted that more qualitative research studies would be valuable to provide an exploration of these first-semester experiences "as seen through the eyes of the students themselves" (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009, p. 198).

In the current qualitative study, therefore, I collected and analyzed participants' views of an advising experience associated with their SSC. I designed the study to explore the experiences of students who were perceived as "connected" and "less connected" by their advisors and who had successfully completed the SSC and persisted into their second year. The study offers insights on how the SSC-based advising model supported student retention, but does not explore reasons for student attrition.

The rationale for the study, therefore, is to use qualitative research to arrive at a clearer understanding of some of the key variables inherent in the transition-to-college experience. As was pointed out above, an increasing percentage of American jobs require attainment of college credentials and students who drop out of college face higher risks of low-wage employment, unemployment, and default on their college loans.

Despite these alarming trends and decades of institutional efforts to enhance retention rates, graduation rates at community colleges remain stagnant. The current study examines the "lived experience" of participants and identifies facilitative experiences that supported the participants' commitment to their studies. Greater understanding of students' advising experiences could lead to improvements to existing models and ultimately changes in institutional practice that would boost levels of student persistence and achievement.

Definitions

Academic Success Course: Also called Student Success Course (SSC) or in some cases, First-year Seminar. These are courses designed to expand upon college orientation programs and provide students with readings, exercises, and experiences on the following topics: personality and interest evaluations, goal setting, study skills, time-management, career exploration, financial literacy, and other topics.

At-risk Students: Students whose previous home or school experiences place them at greater risk for academic difficulty.

Attrition: Departing from college without completing a meaningful credential such as a certificate or degree.

Community College: An institution with limited entrance requirements. Most community colleges require a minimum proficiency in English, which can be waived for students who do not speak English as a first language.

Completion: Completion is defined by the academic goal of the student. For instance, some students intend to complete a certificate program while others have enrolled in an associate degree or bachelor's degree program.

Developmental Advising: This model of advising emphasizes an understanding of the developmental stage of the student, encourages connections between the student and college resources, and focuses on all aspects of the student's life. It is distinguished from "prescriptive advising," which more narrowly addresses the policies surrounding students' academic progress.

Developmental Courses: Sometimes called "pre-college courses," these are classes primarily in English and math that are designed to teach fundamental skills in these areas, allowing students to progress to college-level coursework.

First-generation College Student: A student whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate college degree.

Intrusive Advising: Currently referred to as "proactive advising," this is a model of academic advising that is made "inescapable" for students. For example, students on academic probation might be required to meet periodically for advising check-ins.

Open-Access: This term refers to colleges with minimal entrance requirements; most community colleges require basic proficiency in English but this expectation can be waived for students who do not speak English as a first language.

Persistence: A term used for enrollment into the subsequent semester. For example, fall-to-fall persistence refers to the process of continued college enrollment through the fall and spring semester, with successful enrollment in the subsequent fall semester.

Proactive Advising: Also known as intrusive advising. It is a model of academic advising that is made "inescapable" for students. For example, advising sessions can be required for students on academic probation.

Retention: Continuous enrollment in subsequent semesters. Thus, fall-to-fall retention is a term used for all students who successfully enroll in fall, spring, and the following fall semesters.

Underprepared: Term used for students whose college placement scores indicate that their English and/or math proficiency is below what is considered "college level." These students are required to enroll in "developmental" classes to prepare them for college-level coursework.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Research into college attrition started in the United States more than a century ago (Bean, 1980). A wide variety of theories have been proposed to explain the phenomenon, some of which held influence over numerous subsequent studies for more than fifty years. This literature review offers an analysis of the seminal research on the topic as well as theories that have emerged to specifically address persistence of nontraditional students.

I will review the literature on a range of pertinent topics, including student retention, barriers to college enrollment, standing of students as traditional or nontraditional, models of advising, and the student-success course. I will explore the development of these theories and models from seminal studies to more recent revisions. A summary of the research includes a discussion of one seminal study and more recent research focused on four themes of particular relevance to the current study: demographic status of students (traditional to post-traditional), barriers, advising, and engagement. I will lay the foundation for understanding these critical elements, based on numerous studies, paying particular attention to aspects of the literature that inform the design, purpose, and execution of the current study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an advising experience offered within the context of a student-success course.

Research Questions

1. What were community-college students' perceptions of their advising experience provided within the context of their success course?

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Seminal Retention Research

Researchers of college student retention have relied on three influential seminal theoretical frameworks provided by Vincent Tinto, Alexander Astin, and George Kuh (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Using interrelated concepts of "integration," "involvement," and "engagement," they explore the effects of individual, institutional, and external factors on the persistence of college students (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Tinto's theory of integration focuses on the process of adaptation that students experience throughout their college experience as they internalize the standards and norms associated with the new environment. In comparison, Astin's theory of involvement more narrowly defines the student attitudes and behaviors that predict college retention. He suggests that students who devote more time and energy to academic work, college activities, and faculty interaction are likely to persist toward graduation. Kuh's theory of engagement adds to Astin's analysis. He proposes that students' persistence is influenced partly by their commitment of time and energy to their studies and college activities, and also by institutions' efforts to organize meaningful learning experiences and provide facilitative services.

Wolf-Wendel and colleagues (2009) point out that agreement does not exist on the relationships among the three separate, but closely related theories. While some

scholars view integration as a predecessor to involvement or engagement, others see integration as the outcome of experiences of involvement and engagement.

Tinto's theory of integration.

The topic of college retention has been widely researched over the past century. Vincent Tinto (1975) created a model known as "integration" to understand why students voluntarily depart from college. Originally adapted from Durkheim's (1951) theory of "egotistical suicide," Tinto's work emphasizes the need for college students to adapt themselves to the social and academic environment of the college. "In higher education, integration involves social (personal affiliation) and intellectual (sharing of values) connections" (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009, p. 414). Tinto demonstrated that the experience of integration was also connected to students' level of commitment to the institution and intention to persist. Students who were more fully integrated into the standards, norms, and activities of the college were viewed as more likely to graduate from the college (Seidman, 2005).

Tinto's seminal theory has influenced numerous studies, resulting in the topic of college retention becoming one of the most-researched phenomena in higher education (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2012). In Tinto's own words:

> There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence. (Tinto, 1993, p. 71)

Tinto (1993) also adapted his theoretical model over time to incorporate the ideas of the Dutch-German-French ethnographer, Arnold Van Gennep (1909) on "rites of passage." Tinto pointed out that when entering college, students move into stages of "separation, transition, and incorporation." In separation, they distance themselves from their family of origin and high-school friends. By "transition," he referred to the in-between phase of having disassociated themselves from past norms, but not yet integrating themselves into a new social environment. In the "incorporation" phase, students internalize the new behaviors and views of the college community (Milem & Berger, 1997).

Tinto's work has been widely evaluated and discussed by researchers. The author modified the model in 1975, 1987, and 1993 in response to criticism. Scholars have pointed out that only four of the 13 propositions of Tinto's theory were substantiated by empirical tests involving several institutions and only "five of these primary propositions were robustly backed by single-institution appraisals... Our appraisal also demonstrates partial support for Tinto's theory in residential, but not in commuter universities" (Braxton et al., 1997, p. 156). In addition to concerns over empirical internal consistency, the theory has been critiqued for equity reasons.

> While it may help explain the attrition of White residential, male students, it is not as reliable in analyzing the persistence of female students and minority students... While prior critiques of the theory indicate the need to modify Tinto's concept of "breaking away" when applying the theory to diverse students, research suggests a need for additional refinements. (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 451)

Astin's theory of involvement.

Alexander Astin (1984) who conducted research at roughly the same time as Vincent Tinto, introduced the theory of "involvement" to explain and predict students' tendencies to persist or drop out of college. Like Tinto's model, Astin's theory has been widely used by policymakers to create interventions designed to promote academic persistence.

> Quite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Thus, a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. (p. 518)

As a former clinical psychologist, Astin was also influenced by the notions of "time on task," or "vigilance" as signs of a student's commitment to the educational experience. Astin points out, however, that the theory of "involvement" is not focused only on academic work, but more importantly on the social involvement of the student, including participation in clubs, working on campus, communicating with faculty in and out of the classroom, and other experiences.

> Involvement is typically utilized in research using the Input–Environment–Output (I–E–O) model proposed by Astin (1984). In I–E–O, individual characteristics are controlled for in order to isolate the effect of on-campus participation in various academic and social activities on various outcomes. (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009, p. 411)

Researchers who have attempted to validate or build on Astin's work have

pointed out that, like Tinto's theory, it was developed based on research with full-time,

residential, White students who intended to graduate from college. Most students who

attend community colleges hold few of these characteristics (Wild & Ebers, 2002). The

theory also needs to be adapted for research on adult students who work at least part-time

and may hold responsibility to care for family members (Chaves, 2006). Others have

also argued that Astin's theory of Input—Environment – Output has limitations because

in an environmental setting of a college campus, it is not possible to control all of the

input variables. "However, the I-E-O model, through multivariate analyses, can control

for initial student input. The statistical control for initial student characteristics provides

some additional rigor to studies when randomization of subjects is not possible"

(Thurmond & Popkess-Vawter, 2003, para. 13).

Kuh's theory of engagement.

A third influential theory of college retention, "engagement," emerged from a

study conducted by George Kuh and colleagues using the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2009). The concept includes two basic elements: the amount

of effort that students contribute to their studies and other college-related activities and

the effort of institutions to organize services and learning experiences for students. "High

levels of student engagement are associated with a wide range of educational practices

and conditions, including purposeful student-faculty contact, and active and collaborative

learning" (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009, p. 413).

Like the theories of Tinto and Astin, Kuh's notion of "engagement" has been

applied to the practical aspects of designing services for first-year college students, from

orientation and first-year seminars to residence-life activities and academic advising

(Tinto & Goodsell, 1994). Kuh (2007) specifically addressed college efforts to support

students who were academically unprepared or lacking clear goals.

Institutions that are serious about helping more-vulnerable students succeed

employ other mechanisms like first-year seminars, supplemental instruction, and

placement tests that ensure students are in courses for which they are prepared.

They also provide "intrusive advising" — like George Mason University's

academic-advising office, which contacts students with low grades who have not

declared a major... (p. 2)

In their 2008 study of student engagement, Kuh and colleagues used data from the

NSSE to analyze the effects of experiences of engagement among first-year college

students from 18 colleges and universities, including predominantly White institutions,

historically Black colleges and universities, and Hispanic-serving institutions. The study

found that experiences of "engagement," influenced by students' participation in service-

learning programs, first-year seminars, and other practices,

...Positively affects grades in both the first and last year of college as well as

persistence to the second year at the same institution, even after controlling for a

host of pre-college characteristics and other variables linked with these outcomes,

such as merit aid and parental education. Equally important, the effects of

engagement are generally in the same positive direction for students from different

racial and ethnic backgrounds. (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 555)

Critics of Kuh's notion of engagement have noted that the term was widely used

by colleges prior to the development of the NSSE. It continues to be applied in a variety

of contexts within higher education. For example, "community engagement" is a term that refers to community service and "engaged learning" has been used when discussing certain types of active-learning techniques (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Some researchers, including Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) did not make a distinction between "involvement" and "engagement" in their studies and Vincent Tinto has stated that it is difficult to distinguish between the two ideas (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

While the theories of Tinto, Astin, and Kuh have undoubtedly influenced the progression of qualitative and quantitative research on college persistence, they have also collectively added confusion to the study of student retention, according to some scholars.

> Based on our analysis, it is quite clear that the terms involvement, engagement, and integration and their application in research and practice have oftentimes been used synonymously and that there is significant overlap and confusion relative to the use of these terms. (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, para. 46)

For example, when the NSSE instrument was first developed, there was no distinction made between "involvement" and "engagement." While some researchers have pointed out that the terms have been used interchangeably in the literature, others note a key distinction among them.

> However, a closer look reveals that whereas conceptualizations of involvement and integration involve primarily what students do, and therefore have implications for institutional action, engagement comprises institutional action — encompassing what institutions do, not just indicating what they should do. (Hatch & Garcia, 2017, p. 358)

Subsequent studies have further explored the effectiveness of institutional efforts to support college persistence, especially at institutions with high percentages of nontraditional students.

Work by Zepke (2015) raised questions about the underlying assumptions of what he called the "mainstream view of student engagement." This traditional approach, which Zepke traced to Kuh and colleagues' research with NSSE, is based on a utilitarian view of learning as a process of gaining practical knowledge that can be applied in the workplace. This definition of engagement supports what Zepke called a "climate of ideas dominated by neo-liberalism" in which the aim of education is primarily to advance within the capitalistic economy.

> Mainstream student engagement's elective affinity with neo-liberalism is created by shared understandings of the purpose of higher education: that what is to be learnt is practical and economically useful in the market place; that learning is about performing in certain ways in order to achieve specified outcomes and that quality is assured by measurable accountability processes. (para. 9)

The mainstream definition of student engagement also includes development of critical thinking, a sense of purpose, meaningful working relationships with instructors, and experiences of choice and autonomy. Zepke (2015) argues that while useful, this conception of engagement is too narrow, since it fails to include other paradigms of learning, such as sociocultural, emancipatory, ecological, and holistic.

> In the emancipatory paradigm, engagement research focuses on knowledge, values and behaviours beyond those to be expected from formal pedagogies,

curricula and settings... Learning is not just about what happens in classrooms but considers the effects of wider society and culture on engagement. (para. 13)

Engagement, for example, could be viewed as the process of developing a critical consciousness and a questioning attitude toward education and society at large. It could result in students' engagement with political activism, issues of social justice, or other ways to experience resilience and self-esteem (Zepke, 2015).

Thus, the study of student engagement has expanded beyond institutional efforts to increase student persistence and college completion. Many researchers include a wider set of potential student outcomes, such as participating in political activism, developing personal and social well-being, or "acting constructively in the world" as meaningful examples of student engagement.

Research Focused on Nontraditional Students

Adult, nontraditional, and post-traditional learners.

One influential theory of adult learning, developed by Malcolm Knowles (1996), offers guidance on teaching methods designed specifically for the needs of mature learners. While the term "pedagogy" was widely used at the time to describe educational practices from elementary grades through higher education, Knowles (1996) argued that educational theories were largely based on the teaching methods designed for children, which were inadequate for teaching adults. Since "pedagogy" is based on the Greek stem "paid," meaning "child," Knowles adopted the term "andragogy" based on the Greek work "aner," meaning "man." In his 1996 article, "Andragogy: An emerging technology for adult learning," Knowles offered observations about the characteristics of an adult learner.

These assumptions are that, as a person matures, (1) his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directing human being; (2) he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning; (3) his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles… (p. 55)

The most effective teaching practices emerge from these assumptions, according to Knowles. Since adults are self-directed and rely on a significant set of prior knowledge, they learn best in an environment where they are respected, seen as unique individuals, and given the opportunity to plan their own learning process. "The psychological climate should be one what [*sic*] causes adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported; in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers" (p. 57).

While Knowles (1996) clarified the differing developmental needs of children and adults, Louis Soares (2013) argued for the reinvention of higher education to meet the needs of the "post-traditional" learner. He used the term to refer to persons in the 25- to 64-age category who seek college credentials, are wage-earners in the workforce, and often hold family responsibilities and require developmental courses. These students commonly seek skills and credentials that qualify them for higher compensation by employers and they require flexible learning options that accommodate their work schedules.

This new demand encompasses: Modular, easy-to-access instruction; Blended academic and occupational curricula; Progressive credentialing of knowledge and skills (sub-degree level); Financial, academic, and career advising; and Public

policy that reflects the complex task of balancing life, work, and education. (Soares, 2013, p. 3)

Soares (2013) acknowledged the overlap between the categories of the post-traditional and nontraditional learner. The term "nontraditional undergraduate" was defined in a 2002 report by the National Center for Education Statistics as a student who holds any of the following seven characteristics: took more than one year off after high school; attends college part-time; works full time; holds financial independence from parents; has dependents; is a single parent; has not earned a high school diploma or GED. (NCES, 2001). This particular definition does not associate the term with a particular age range, but many students who hold any of these characteristics are older than the traditional-age student who enrolled in college directly after high school at about age 18.

Students in the post- and nontraditional categories juggle work with school and family responsibilities; they seek flexible learning opportunities that fit into busy schedules; they are generally goal-oriented individuals who seek a payback from their investment in higher education.

Competency-based education, corporate universities, and prior learning assessment are all indicators of nations striving to meet the demands of their labor markets for postsecondary knowledge and skills and educate post-traditional learners in an efficient and cost-effective manner. (Soares, 2013, p. 13)

Thus, Knowles (1996) and Soares (2013) offered frameworks for understanding the needs of a growing segment of the higher-education student population. They pointed out a need for colleges and universities to adapt new forms of curriculum, credentialing,

and teaching methods to meet the educational needs of these more mature, experienced learners.

Barriers for nontraditional students.

The researchers Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland (2017), relying on previous work by Ekstrom (1972), described three categories of barriers experienced by adult learners and women, respectively, when they entered college: situational, dispositional, and institutional. While Ekstrom (1972) provided the initial definitions of the terms, the ideas were further developed by Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland (2017).

According to the researchers, situational barriers include financial, familial, physical, sociological, and residential aspects of students' lives. For example, Ekstrom (1972) explored students' perceptions of their ability to afford college attendance and found the following:

> The interaction between social class and financial obstacles to postsecondary education has been documented by Johnstone and Rivera (1965). For women under age 45, 74 percent of those of low SES, 53 percent of those of middle SES, and 19 percent of those of high SES reported they "could not afford" to participate in further education. (p. 44)

Osam and colleagues (2017) added that financial barriers were the most significant challenges facing adult learners considering returning to college:

> It could be argued that one of the most glaring constraints to returning to college is the availability of financial resources. Research conducted within the past

decade, both within the United States and internationally, has consistently identified finances as a barrier to college education for adult learners. (p. 55)

The researchers found that financial barriers were viewed differently by men and women. Due to men's perceived roles as breadwinners, they were less likely to take a hiatus from the workplace in order to enroll in college. Women, on the other hand, often played multiple roles including working part-time or full-time, caring for children or ailing family members, and maintaining a home. "Those who decided to drop out of the workforce to focus on their studies often experienced stress due to competing demands" (Osam, et al., 2017, p. 56).

Ekstrom (1927) defined dispositional barriers as characteristics such as dependence/independence, motivation, fear of failure or success, levels of activity or passivity, level of confidence, personality traits, and attitudes toward education and intellectual activity. In the current study, these characteristics were viewed as "incoming barriers" that influenced participants' initial levels of motivation and engagement. They were distinguished from "ongoing obstacles," such as financial stress, academic setbacks, and health issues. Ekstrom noted that this category of barrier could have a profound impact on women's level of success in higher education, but generally could not be significantly changed by institutional policies:

> The entire socialization process of women encourages the development of a personality which may be at odds with the characteristics needed for obtaining education. The personality characteristics which may serve as especially strong barriers are dependence, passivity, and feelings of inferiority. (p. 68)

Osam and colleagues (2017) also found that adult learners were significantly impacted by dispositional factors, and many felt isolated in facing these challenges. As discussed by Cross (1981), individuals felt they needed to resolve dispositional barriers independently. Research by Goto and Martin (2009) found that responding to such challenges required determination and self-reliance. "Returning to school as an adult learner can be a daunting prospect. The longer an adult learner waits to go to college, the more challenging the adaptation" (Osam et al., 2017, p. 57).

Finally, the researchers defined institutional barriers such as admissions practices, financial aid policies, orientation and registration practices, faculty and staff attitudes, and advising or counseling services. Ekstrom (1972) found that admissions practices were the most influential of these barriers for women at the time:

Many institutions have quotas for the number of women to be admitted. Others refuse admission to mature students, male or female, or to part-time students. Many schools are reluctant to accept transfer students or, alternatively (and more frequently) to accept transfer credits. (p. 3)

Osam and colleagues (2017) noted that for adult learners, the scheduling of courses posed some of the biggest challenges in this category. Students who could not accommodate their work schedules with evening, weekend, or online courses found it impossible to make progress toward their degrees (Hardin, 2008). This three-part classification model was also adapted by other researchers who created a new paradigm for understanding adult students' internal and external pressures.

Deggs (2011) used a qualitative study to update the classification of adult-learner barriers originally proposed by Ekstrom (1972) and later by Cross (1981). Deggs' findings were used to develop three new categories of barriers: intrapersonal; career and job-related; and academic-related barriers.

In Deggs' (2011) system, the "intrapersonal barriers" category includes elements of Ekstrom's (1972) dispositional and situational barriers since it refers to such personal qualities as level of confidence and fear of failure as well as actions taken by students to meet academic responsibilities in the context of other aspects of their lives. Thus, it includes themes of time-management, financial-planning, and balancing college and family responsibilities. In Ekstrom's (1972) model, as noted above, students' financial, familial, and physical challenges were perceived to be the "situational" category.

It merits comment that the barriers identified in this study provided an updated paradigm and provided greater insight into the categories of barriers identified by Cross (1981). However, the claim cannot be made that these barriers should replace Cross' categorization of barriers for adult learners. The accounts of barriers experienced by adult learners as recorded in this study show no change in what constitutes a situational or dispositional barrier over the past 30 years. (Deggs, 2011, p. 1549)

Deggs' (2011) three-part model placed more emphasis on students' concerns over workplace and job-related demands. His second category of "career and job-related" barriers was focused primarily on students' perceived difficulties in meeting their current

job-related responsibilities. It did not include students' efforts to plan for their future careers.

The "academic-related barriers" included all elements covered by the "institutional barriers" category in the Ekstrom (1972) model, including "meeting the general expectations as a student" and "balancing academic courseloads [*sic*]." Unlike Ekstrom, however, the "academic-related barriers" included challenges resulting from the use of technology and difficulties faced in the online student experience. It also did not include such institutional practices as admissions, advising, financial aid, and others.

Thus, Deggs' (2011) system helped to update the category of institutional barriers to include students' interactions with technology, and it combined aspects of dispositional and situational barriers into the new categories of "intrapersonal" and "career and job-related" barriers. The study also pointed out that these barriers continued to exert pressure on adult students throughout the period of enrollment in college.

An accepting community: sense of belonging.

College-persistence research that built on the seminal studies of Tinto, Astin, Kuh and others focused on such themes as institutional fit, financial need, racial climate, support from friends and family, and others (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Many of these studies have attempted to address concerns that previous retention research did not fully consider the experience of nontraditional students and students of color.

...The nature of integration and the applicability of many aspects of Tinto's model to students from diverse backgrounds have been criticized. Tinto (1993) considered many of these criticisms in his latest revision of the rationale to

support his model, but these considerations have not been included in the

framework that researchers commonly use to guide their empirical tests.

(Hurtado & Carter, 1997, para. 2)

The theory of "sense of belonging" has emerged out of this effort to explore the

experience of all students, including students of color, students who were underprepared

for college coursework, and those whose parents had not completed college degrees.

While the concept of "sense of belonging" is similar to that of integration or involvement,

it differs in important ways, according to researchers.

There is … conceptual justification for examining sense of belonging in studies

of student persistence. Most persistence studies include measures of social and/or

academic integration, but the psychological sense that one is an accepted member

of one's community, or sense of belonging, is distinct from one's level of

involvement with the community. (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007, p. 806)

Hausman, Schofield, and Woods (2007) used "individual growth-curve

monitoring" to study the "sense of belonging" of White and African American students at

a large, public university in the eastern United States. Three surveys were administered

to first-year African-American students (N=254) and White students (N=291). The

purpose of the study was to see whether a sense of belonging was a predictor of students'

intentions to persist in college and whether an intervention created to enhance students'

sense of belonging would have an impact on persistence rates:

Sense of belonging was found to predict intentions to persist, controlling for

background variables and other predictors of persistence. Overall, sense of

belonging and intentions to persist declined over the academic year. However,

the decline in sense of belonging was smaller for students in the intervention

group. (p. 803)

Researchers have identified several sub-groups of students who are more likely to

struggle with establishing a sense of belonging in college. These include ethnic

minorities, students with disabilities, first-generation college students, those of low socio-

economic status, or those on probation (O'Keefe, 2013). Creating a "caring

environment" was viewed by one scholar as the most important factor that can contribute

toward persistence for these students.

That a student feels cared for is critical with the tertiary education environment,

both in ensuring that students perform to the best of their abilities, and in

preventing student attrition... A sense of connection can emerge if the student

has a relationship with just one key person within the tertiary institution and this

relationship can significantly impact upon a student's decision to remain in

college. (O'Keefe, 2013, p. 607)

Precursor to engagement: validation theory.

While a sense of belonging is associated with a student's perception that he or she

is an accepted member of the college community, other researchers focused on the

individual student's experience of self-worth. The notion of "validation" was first

discussed by Terenzini and colleagues (1994), in relation to the "Transition to College

Project." The theory was more fully explored by Laura Rendon (1994), who found

through a qualitative study that many nontraditional college students entered college with

doubts about their own capacity to learn and succeed. Especially students of color, first-

generation college students, students with disabilities, or students from low-income

families were prone to the belief that they "were not college material." Rendon found that nontraditional students who lacked validation "...feel crippled, silenced, subordinate, and/or mistreated" (p. 44).

According to Rendon (1994), validation is an experience of empowerment that occurs when another person takes interest in the student and expresses confidence in his or her potential.

> Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development... When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self-worth and feel that they, and everything that they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable. (p. 44)

This affirmative response can be provided by students' family members, peers, faculty members, advisors, counselors, and others. The experience is most useful when offered very early in the students' college career; the first few weeks after enrollment are most critical.

Quantitative studies have also been conducted to evaluate the theory. Hurtado and colleagues (2011) used the Diverse Learning Environments survey with students from a wide range of colleges: two-year, public and private, selective, and open-access. They found that students of color reported lower levels of validating experiences, especially in the classroom, than their White peers.

> ... Differences in mean scores indicate that students of color report lower levels of validation than White students, with a more stark difference in academic

validation in the classroom. These results suggest that students of color and White students experience validation differently at their institutions, which is consistent with previous research on classroom experiences for underrepresented students. (p. 66)

Other researchers have pointed out that overlap exists between the theories of sense of belonging, validation, and others. Schuetz (2008) noted that a sense of belonging and validation are sometimes used interchangeably by scholars. In their 2011 study, Nora, Urick, and Cerecer found that themes such as self-worth and self-concept, sense of cultural identity, Self Determination Theory, and affirmation can all serve as "proxies" or closely related concepts, for researchers investigating validation.

Many scholars have also discussed a variety of ways that validation theory could be applied by college faculty, staff, and administrators. Rendon (1994), for example, developed a chart of validating and non-validating approaches for college teaching. Faculty who seek to create a validating classroom environment are encouraged to view themselves as partners in learning rather than the sole source of knowledge, for example. Instructors are also encouraged to use active learning methods such as group discussions as opposed to lecture-style teaching that places students in a passive role. Recommendations for faculty to collaborate with learning-commons staff or student-affairs staff on campus are often met with resistance, due to divisions of norms, values, and organizational structure between faculty and staff (Kuh & Banta, 2000).

Models of Advising

The effectiveness of academic advising as a tool for enhancing student retention has been demonstrated by many researchers (Grites & Gordon, 2000, Heisserer & Parette, 2002, Light, 2001, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Based on a qualitative study, Light (2001) concluded that "good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). Of the 82 different interventions evaluated in a study by Habley and McClanahan (2004), first-year programs and academic advising were chosen by students as the top two college resources that support persistence. No single, comprehensive theory of advising is accepted in the field, according to Creamer (2000) but several approaches have been widely used for more than four decades in higher education (Grites & Gordon, 2000). They include prescriptive, developmental, advising as teaching, and proactive (formerly referred to as intrusive) advising.

Continuum from prescriptive to developmental.

Grites and Gordon (2000) point out that prescriptive and developmental advising can be viewed as opposite ends of a continuum. The former refers to a process of answering students' questions about such matters as program requirements, change of major, transfer of credits, and other college policies, with the advisor serving in an authoritative role. Such an approach can be preferred by students since it can be similar to the model used by many high-school guidance counselors (Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

The other end of the spectrum, developmental advising, is seen as a more holistic, exploratory approach in which the advisor and student work collaboratively to understand the students' learning experience, values, strengths, and interests in order to enhance their educational experience. Crookston (1972) described the approach as "concerned not only

with a personal and vocational decision but also with facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills" (p. 12).

Proactive advising.

The "proactive" approach to advising (formerly referred to as "intrusive") is frequently used with at-risk students, such as those with developmental learning needs, those on probation, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. A high percentage of community-college students fall into one or more of these categories (Stovall 2000). Proactive advising is designed to be "inescapable" for students and contact with the advisor is required on a regular basis. The practice of offering advising within the context of a required course is an example of the proactive model.

> The term "intrusive" has been used in advising literature to define intervention strategies. This paper defines "intrusive advising" to mean deliberate structured student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate a student to seek help. (Earl, 1988, p. 28)

More recently, this advising theory has been referred to as "proactive" advising and it emphasizes "early and frequent contact" between students and advisors in order to identify problems before they become unresolvable (Heisserer & Parette, 2001).

> Academic advisors who were noted for their impact on racial and ethnic minority student success make intentional efforts to proactively connect students with resources... In addition to such informal proactive practices, several participants mentioned the importance of systematized proactive-advising practices on their campuses... (Museus & Ravello, 2010, p. 55)

In order to ensure that students receive early and frequent advising experiences, some institutions have situated these models of developmental and proactive advising within the student-success course.

Advising as teaching.

Sense of belonging and validation theories are attempts to describe the outcomes of the successful advising relationship; researchers have also developed models to describe the process by which such results can be achieved. Crookston's (1972) seminal article, "A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching" argued for a broader conceptualization of advising as a "negotiated agreement" between advisor and advisee. Rather than a prescriptive task in which authoritative advisors explain college policies and review program requirements, the "developmental" approach involves collaborative exploration and a focus on learning: "A key developmental concept is the university viewed as an intellectual learning community within which individuals and social systems interact in and out of the classroom and utilize developmental tasks within and outside the university for personal growth" (p. 9).

Scholars have noted that despite the groundbreaking title of the article, Crookston did not fully develop the learning-centered concept at the time. Other researchers have added significantly to the model, however, by applying Fink's (2003) learning paradigm to advising (Hemwall & Tracht, 2005). Lowenstein (2005) provided suggestions for developing an advising "curriculum." And Kelley (2008) outlined the steps in creating effective advising-related learning experiences for students. Each of these researchers argued for the fundamental notion that learning is the desired outcome of the advising

relationship and that learning requires active engagement on the part of the student and the practitioner.

Piaget's perspective has been supported by recent outcomes research focused on college students; it suggests that students are more likely to develop strong cognitive skills when placed in situations that require the active identification of information and subsequent construction of ideas. (Hemwall & Tracht, 2005, p. 80)

Marc Lowenstein (2005) raised a fundamental question in his article, "If Advising is Teaching, What do Advisors Teach?" His analysis included the observation that the advisor might be the only individual at the institution who interacts with the student across multiple semesters, and therefore has the opportunity to raise questions about the student's experience of the entire curriculum.

What do advisors teach? Lowenstein (2005) offered a range of responses. Advisors teach lessons on "creating the logic of one's education;" "viewing the seemingly disconnected pieces of curriculum" as a elements of a complete learning experience; and relating new learning to the knowledge that students have previously gained (p. 72).

If one were to imagine these goals as the list of "course objectives" on a syllabus, the scholar Bruce Kelley (2008) provided the rationale for an accompanying course outline of activities designed to meet those goals. In "Significant Learning, Significant Advising," Kelley (2008) explained that just like an excellent teacher, an excellent advisor creates a series of well-chosen experiences that allow students to use critical

thinking skills, design solutions, and gain required abilities through intentional planning and action.

> The academic curriculum is one important element that advisees may learn, but the advising curriculum might also include learning leadership skills, tolerance, time management, and more. Students cannot learn everything at once, however, so the order in which advisors structure activities must be planned. (p. 26)

In her article "Advising as Teaching," Carol Ryan (1992) suggested that the attitudes, qualities, and practices associated with excellent teaching are also required for the advising profession. She therefore recommended that advisors prepare for advising sessions with students in much the same way that instructors organize materials and create plans for classroom experiences. She noted that faculty advisors could benefit from an understanding of the similarity of the roles. "I have suggested that if more emphasis is placed on the transference of teaching knowledge and skills to the advising setting, faculty may perceive their role as advisors differently" (p. 7).

Though the authors who developed the learning-centered paradigm theory did not advocate for situating this learning process in the classroom, other researchers have argued for this step.

Research Focused on First-year Experience

Effectiveness of student-success course.

According to Martina Stovall (2000), college-retention interventions were especially important at community colleges where about 40% of students required at least one developmental course and more than half of students were the first in their family to

attend college. One commonly used program is the "student-success course," also called a "college orientation course" or a "first-year seminar." The courses were generally designed to introduce students to campus resources such as tutoring and advising; promote interaction with peers and faculty; improve study skills such as active reading, writing, and note-taking; and promote more effective time-management skills (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Barefoot & Gardner, 1993).

Quantitative studies demonstrated that these courses helped students to make meaningful connections with peers and faculty and introduce them to study skills and time-management skills that improved their academic performance (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009). One study, conducted through the Community College Research Center, analyzed data from 28 community colleges in Florida. A cohort of students enrolled in what was called a "student life skills course" was compared to another group who had not completed the course, over a period of about 17 semesters.

> The researchers found that students who enrolled in SLS courses were more likely
> than their peers to complete a credential over the study time period. Students
> taking the SLS courses also had increased chances of persistence and transfer to
> the Florida state university system. (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009, para. 10)

The authors of the study also pointed out that a lack of qualitative studies on the subject prompted them to subsequently conduct qualitative research. Their results showed that among other benefits, students mentioned that the courses offered them the chance to get to know their peers and instructors in the courses. As pointed out by Tinto, Astin, Kuh, and others, the integration or involvement of students with their peers, faculty, and staff has been identified as a factor that supports student persistence.

Several students described how the student success course helped them forge relationships with their peers and professors. These relationships are hypothesized to be particularly important, because they can help students integrate into the social and academic fabric of the school, thereby encouraging them to persist to a degree. It is often difficult for community college students to forge such relationships because of the myriad demands on their time. (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009, para. 48)

The courses are also sometimes viewed by students as unnecessary, however, since many feel they have already developed strong study skills and time-management ability (Duggan & Williams, 2010).

I don't think everyone should be forced to take this course. I already knew this stuff and didn't learn much, but others could really benefit from it, those who didn't get to learn how to manage their time and how to study when they were still in high school. (para. 17)

Academic advisors and "success coaches" are increasingly being called upon by community colleges to help facilitate students' involvement or integration into college communities. In some cases, the resulting social connections help students to become more engaged as learners in their chosen program of study (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009).

Advising associated with academic courses.

Over the past decade, researchers have noted commonalities in the objectives of first-year advising and the first-year seminar course, a version of the student-success course prevalent on four-year college campuses. Hunter, Henscheid, and Mouton (2007)

pointed out three common objectives of these two forms of student support: "Encourage self-exploration/personal development; provide orientation to campus resources; and introduce a discipline" (p. 102). The researchers therefore proposed that college faculty and student-affairs staff collaborate on the design and instruction of the courses. "Moving our institutions toward a philosophy of advising as teaching has no more fertile ground than within the first-year seminar" (p. 104).

In fact, stronger collaboration between faculty and student-affairs professionals has been recommended for many years as a strategy that positively impacts persistence efforts. Among the areas proposed for collaboration are co-instruction of first-year seminar courses, assessment and planning of learning communities, residence-life advisory boards, and learning-commons special projects.

> Joint work on freshman-year experience courses is underway at the University of Memphis and at Arizona State University. According to Sheila Bassoppo-Moyo, doctoral candidate in the College of Education's Department of Leadership at Memphis, student affairs staff regularly teach in the freshman course, which is designed to introduce new students to the purposes of general education as well as to student development services. (Kuh & Banta, 2000, para. 22)

Much of the research on faculty-staff collaboration has focused on the challenges inherent in the practice. Kuh and Banta (2000) pointed out three general categories of barriers that must be overcome in order for such partnerships to be successful. The first is "cultural-historical barriers," referring to the values and norms associated with the two groups: "Over time a status differential developed, with the faculty recognized as 'first-

class,' because they focus on the core academic tasks of the university, and student affairs professionals relegated to 'second-class' status" (para. 6).

The two groups are generally also separated by organizational, governance, and budgetary structures, making collaboration difficult (Kuh & Banta, 2000). Thirdly, researchers have noted that in order for these natural divisions to be overcome, leadership is needed. Engstrom and Tinto (2000) recommended that an upper-level administrator serve as a "bridge-builder" who could work across the natural divisions within institutions to enhance faculty-staff partnerships. Guarasci (2001) added that such efforts served to create "institutional coherence" (p. 109) that allowed students to make connections with a wider circle of supportive professionals.

> Institutions that have successfully overcome these challenges have developed innovative and successful efforts, though a dearth of research has been conducted. A national survey of student and academic affairs collaboration suggests that higher education institutions have not engaged in much restructuring or alteration of mission or culture to facilitate change; instead, they depend on individual leadership and personalities. (Kezar, 2006, p. 808)

Summary of the Literature

Scholars of student retention have explored a number of variables associated with students' experiences of entering and engaging in institutions of higher education. They note that students enter the college environment with a wide variety of economic, social, and academic characteristics. These entering characteristics in many cases included such barriers as situational, dispositional, or institutional (Osam et al., 2017.) Researchers demonstrated that while participating in higher education, students exert effort as

learners, adapt to new norms, and interact with such facilitative processes as classroom instruction and advising. In time, students either decide to persist toward completion of their academic programs or they voluntarily choose to leave the institutions without completing their degrees.

This summary discusses one seminal study and one later study focused on the following themes: students' entering demographic characteristics, barriers, advising models, and engagement. The summary highlights the evolution of related theories and models over time and lays the groundwork for analyzing my findings in the current study.

The first pair of studies, focused on adult and post-traditional learners, offers insight on the study participants' status as adult, nontraditional, or post-traditional learners. According to Soares (2013), students who attend college part-time, are employed full-time, commute to college, have children, or begin college over the age of 25 are considered "nontraditional" students. He defined the "post-traditional" learner as a person between the ages of 25 and 64 who does not hold a college degree, seeks a job-related credential, juggles work with family responsibilities, and requires developmental or remedial coursework. He acknowledged the overlap between the two categories. Knowles' (1996) examined the self-directed, experiential learning that he argued most effectively meets the needs of adult learners. His work provided context for understanding the learning experiences of study participants.

The remaining three pairs of studies were chosen to offer insight into three other fundamental aspects of students' experience explored through the current study: barriers, advising, and engagement. Each pair of studies also included one seminal work and one

more recent analysis. I selected them in order to situate the current study's findings within a continuum of previous results.

The articles on barriers to higher education offered two different methods of classification. In her analysis of barriers faced by women seeking to enroll in higher education, Ekstrom, (1972) identified the general categories of situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. These barriers refer respectively to financial, sociological, or familial characteristics; personal qualities such as levels of confidence or motivation; and college admissions, retention, or financial-aid policies.

Deggs' (2011) classification system of barriers for adult learners included the categories of "intrapersonal," "career and job-related," and "academic-related" barriers. The intrapersonal category of Deggs' model held many similarities to Ekstrom's situational and dispositional characteristics and provided insight into the pre-college barriers of study participants. Deggs' "academic-related" barriers offered insight into continuing obstacles faced by students.

I selected two models of advising as a lens through which to view participants' perceptions of their advising experiences. Crookston's (1972) study on developmental advising established a continuum from a more authoritative, prescriptive approach to advising to the developmental approach, which was viewed as more holistic and exploratory. Lowenstein's (2005) model of "advising as teaching" explored ways in which the advisor could help students connect the disparate parts of their education and facilitate their interdisciplinary understanding of the entire curriculum. These models

provided background for understanding students' advising experiences offered within the context of the SSC.

Finally, a pair of studies on student engagement offered insight on motivational factors for students. Kuh's (2017) analysis defined engagement as student effort on academic tasks and meaningful college-related activities. The definition also included efforts by the institution to support students' successful college transition. The underlying assumption of Kuh's definition, said Zepke (2015), was that education results in skills "economically useful in the market-place." (para. 9) Zepke argued that this "mainstream" view of engagement was too narrow because it did not include other ways that students could legitimately engage deeply with education, such as developing a critical consciousness and participating in political activism.

This summary of the literature described the arc of research, from seminal to recent studies, devoted to analyzing important themes explored through the current study. A discussion of how this review of the literature relates to the study's findings appears in Chapter Five: Discussions of Findings and Conclusions. While in some cases the current study's findings aligned more closely with the seminal studies, in others they suggested a revision to the existing models.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The literature review discusses the seminal research on college student persistence as well as theories and models designed specifically to explain the experience of nontraditional college students. While the seminal research was originally conducted with White students of residential, four-year colleges, over time the studies included minority students, first-generation college students, student of low socio-economic status, and others (Guiffrida, 2006). The SSC-based advising model, explored in the current study, refers to the practice of offering the services of a dedicated staff advisor in the context of the success course. Each advisor attended all class meetings and offered one-to-one advising sessions with each student at least twice during the fall semester. While they did not serve as the instructor of record for the courses, they did facilitate some classroom activities. As discussed previously, evidence to support the effectiveness of faculty-staff collaboration in the SSC is largely anecdotal. (Salinas, Jensen, & Reischl, 2014).

All six participants in the study were enrolled in success courses that were facilitated by an instructor-advisor team. While the instructors handled syllabus design, class planning, and grading, the advisors provided a range of services, such as individualized guidance on academic planning, referral to college resources, and help with planning a transfer to a four-year institution. In many cases, participants also consulted with their faculty advisors in planning coursework for future semesters or learning about career opportunities in their field.

The literature review revealed a dearth of qualitative or quantitative studies on the SSC-based advising model, although anecdotal reports on its use in higher education were widespread (Kezar, 2006). Scholars have identified the need for more qualitative studies of students' perceptions of the student-success course (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009). These factors point to gaps in the research that have influenced the design of the current study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an advising experience offered within the context of a student-success course.

Research Questions

1. What were community-college students' perceptions of their advising experience provided within the context of their success course?

2. How were students' overall college transition experiences influenced, if at all, by their advising experience?

Methodological Overview

I chose a qualitative methodology for this study due to the nature of the questions posed. I was interested in exploring the "lived experience" of students whose recent transition to college was mediated by an advising experience offered in the context of their student-success course (Van Manen, 1990). I used a "descriptive interpretive" paradigm in order to explore the topic from the individual experience of students with the hope that the results would lead to modest improvements of interventions designed to improve student retention.

Interpretive research typically tries to understand the social world as it is (with the possibility of modest improvement) from the perspective of individual experience, hence an interest in subjective worldviews… Humans are viewed as creators of their worlds; thus agency in shaping the everyday world is fundamental to the paradigm. (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 34)

My approach is phenomenological since I wanted to capture and express the quality of my participants' experience in their transition to college (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Phenomenological studies generally involve collecting the views of a number of participants in order to describe a "universal essence (a 'grasp of the very nature of the thing')" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 58).

In *Interviewing as Qualitative Research,* Irving Seidman (2013) offers four themes that guide the practice of phenomenological research, based on his study of such authors as Alfred Schutz (1967), Martin Heidegger (1962), Jean-Paul Sartre (1956), and Max Van Manen (1990). Seidman (2013) focuses on the temporal nature of human experience (p. 16), the "subjective understanding" of the interviewee, the "lived experience" of participants, and the process of constructing meaning through the interview process. These themes guided my choice of questions, process of asking follow-up questions, and coding and analysis of the interview transcripts for the current study.

In phenomenological research, the goal is to understand the subjective experience of the interviewee, though we realize that it is impossible to enter another person's mind (p. 17). One way I attempted to achieve this goal was to "ask participants to reconstruct,

not to remember" (p. 90). By requesting stories about experience, illustrated by concrete details, I gained a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experience

Researcher subjectivity and practice of "epoche."

Phenomenological studies are also "constructivist" in nature since they are conducted with the underlying assumption that reality is socially constructed by individuals. "Constructivists embrace subjectivity as a pathway deeper into understanding the human dimensions of the world in general as well as whatever specific phenomena they are examining" (Patton, 2002, p. 267).

Becoming aware of one's own biases and preconceptions about the inquiry is a necessary step before embarking on a phenomenological study. In order for this study's results to be credible, the audience must understand my purposes for the inquiry as well as the theoretical orientation and cultural knowledge that influenced the results. This process of "reflexivity" includes awareness of my reaction to the stories of participants and the contemplation of those attitudes (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

For these reasons, I used the practice of "epoche" (Creswell, 1998), to identify the rationale for studying the issue, relationship to the project, and any biases or assumptions that could potentially influence the analysis of data. Throughout the research project, I was aware of and reported on my subjective experience by "bracketing" or recording observations of my values or biases; I used "memos" or notes to capture personal insights about the research process (Beaudry & Miller, 2016).

Through work as an advisor for community college students, I have developed strong interviewing skills focused on open-ended questions, active listening, and awareness of non-verbal cues to an interviewee's state of mind. Previous work as a

journalist, writing-center professional, and college English instructor also contributed to my skills in interviewing, close reading, and textual analysis.

The inspiration for the study emerged from my participation in an experimental advising model at a New England community college in which students experienced individualized advising in the context of the first-semester student-success course. Thus, I observed a range of student reactions to the intervention and sought a deeper understanding of its merits and weaknesses.

I hold strong opinions related to the persistence of community college students. Among them is the belief that higher education is a life-enhancing experience, especially for students who may not have fully valued education at the middle- or high-school levels. The college experience enhances social equity and inspires intrinsic motivation for many students of diverse cultural, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. The early semesters of the college experience can be a time of discovering academic passion, exploring meaningful career options, and enhancing cognitive, social, and emotional growth, moving students toward greater maturity and financial independence. It is also a challenging time of life when many students experience personal loss, health or mental-health difficulties, changes in relationships with family members or friends, financial need, and other obstacles.

Thus, I began the study with an understanding of the range of barriers facing community college students, as well as an optimistic view of the potential of higher education to enhance their lives. I created a study design that allowed for a wide range of student perspectives to be voiced. My primary objectives were openness, perceptiveness, and commitment to research integrity.

Study Participants

Criteria for selection of participants.

I used the method of "criterion sampling" to select the six participants for the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All students who experienced advising within their student-success course in the fall of 2017 were considered potential participants. Staff advisors who provided advising through one of the college's student-success programs facilitated the selection of participants. Each offered dedicated staff advising to students but only one of the programs provided scholarship support to qualifying in-state students with financial need (as demonstrated by their federal financial aid application.)

I asked each of the four advisors to offer the names of four students, whom they thought would be honest and forthcoming about their advising experience, in the following two categories: (A) Connected students who seemed to benefit from the advising experience; (B) Less connected students who may or may not have benefited from the advising experience. Category (A) referred to students who actively participated in at least three advising meetings during the fall semester and also attended additional events and workshops offered during the academic year by the program. Category (B) referred to students who participated in fewer than three advising meetings within the first semester and despite email and phone reminders, attended very few or no events or workshops offered during the academic year by the program.

From their list of students, I selected those who met the following criteria: (a) Completed the SSC course with required advising with a grade of "C" or better; (b) Successfully enrolled and persisted in subsequent semesters after completing the SSC course; (c) Planned to live within commuting distance of their campus during the

interviewing period. (Since interviews were conducted away from campus, students' summer/fall residence needed to be roughly within an hour of the campus to allow me to travel to the meetings.)

I selected equal numbers of participants from categories (A) and (B) described above. Because I wanted the sample to roughly reflect the demographic makeup of the college as a whole, the pool needed to have at least half of the students enrolled in a developmental course in their first semester; at least one minority student; at least half students of low-income status; and a balanced gender ratio. I also considered participants' age, college major, and status as non-native English speakers in the selection process.

A total of 22 students were recommended by advisors, 12 in the connected category and 10 in the less-connected category. I contacted the potential participants by email and/or phone calls and an initial seven students expressed willingness to participate. Two students subsequently declined to be interviewed and I found one replacement participant. Later efforts to add more participants were not successful.

The criterion sampling method resulted in a participant pool that matched the demographic characteristics of the college as a whole in some categories better than others, based on the college's 2016-17 Fact Book. In the categories of age, developmental-course enrollment, income, and major, for example, the participant pool was fairly representative of the general population. For example, 62% of students enrolled at the college matriculated between the ages of 18 to 24. Among study participants, 83% fell into that category. About 47% of the college's students placed into a developmental math course upon enrollment. Among the study participants, 50%

reported taking developmental math. Among the wider college population, 64% were low income (or qualified for a Pell Grant). Based on anecdotal evidence shared during interviews, 83% of study participants fell into low-income status.

Finally, the range of majors represented in the study matched fairly well with that of the college as a whole. About 16% of all students majored in the applied technology division as did 10% of study participants; 33% of all students majored in arts and sciences as did 40% of study participants; 33% of all students majored in business and information technology as did 20% of study participants; finally, 7% of all students major in health sciences as did 7% of study participants.

In other ways, however, the participant pool did not match the student body as a whole. While the gender breakdown at the college was 47% male and 53% female, the study included 33% males and 66% females. While half of the study participants were immigrants whose first language was not English, only about 1% of the students enrolled at the college were "non-resident aliens" or international students. The Fact Book did not include data on "asylum seekers" and other immigrants who had lived in the U.S. for a year or more before enrolling. However, according to the college's institutional research director, 11% of the college's students spoke a language other than English at home, based on fall 2018 data (Research director, personal communication, May 21, 2019).

Therefore, while the study's participants were representative of the student population based on several factors including age, developmental-course enrollment, income, and major, they were not as representative in terms of gender and status as English language learners. The results are therefore not generalizable to the whole population of the College.

The study participants were successful students who had completed the SSC with a grade of "C" or better and had persisted into their second year. All of the participants were somewhat engaged in the advising experience provided through the SSC, as described in the criterion sampling method. My study did not explore the experience of students who had very little or no connection with their advisor, who were suspended from the college after their first semester, or who had chosen to leave the college for other reasons.

Participant profiles.

The following brief profiles were created as background information on participants' "lived experience." The names of participants were not used in any electronic or physical records. Instead, I used a code name for each, based on the student's major and the first letter of the advisor's name. When reporting the results of the study, pseudonyms were used for participants. In the course of the interviewing process, the students discussed aspects of their family background and culture, previous educational experience, and current attitudes about their college experience. Participants' profiles appear in alphabetical order of the pseudonyms.

Adam (Electrical Engineering Technologies major).

At age 38, Adam frequently feels out of place in his classes, surrounded by students in their teens and early twenties. He had attempted college once previously, immediately after graduating from high school, but says he was more interested in partying and did not have the maturity to be serious about his studies. Soon after failing out of the university, he was prescribed an opioid pain killer for an injury sustained in a

snowboarding accident. He enjoyed the emotional state generated by the drug, gained access to a continuing supply, and eventually became addicted to heroin.

The addiction eventually led to the loss of his job, significant other, home, and relationships with family members, including his young daughter. Adam became homeless and only started a period of rehabilitation about ten years later, after committing crimes, going to jail, and meeting counselors from Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. By the time he enrolled in his college program in Electrical Engineering Technologies, Adam realized he needed to make a complete reversal in his attitudes, behaviors, and goals. With a generous helping of "humble pie," he turned himself into a "hero student," who kept up with his assignments, sat in the front row in class, and reached out to professors and advisors whenever he had questions. Currently, in his second year of college, Adam is employed as an electrician and looks forward to completing his degree within a year with a high GPA.

Adelle (Biotechnology major).

Adelle emigrated from the Democratic Republic of Congo at age 18, due to her parents' fears for her safety in a threatening political climate. She arrived in the U.S. unaccompanied by family members, with limited English language skills, but with strong ability in math and science. With the help of her parents, through long-distance phone calls and other forms of communication, Adelle created a set of personal goals that guide her day-to-day life as a college student. She holds two jobs, one with a restaurant and one with a biotechnology company. She is enrolled full-time in an associate-degree program in biotechnology and intends to transfer to a university where she will complete a bachelor's degree in biotechnology.

Adelle describes herself as a fiercely determined and passionate person who "does not like failure." She frequently speaks about the importance of goals and says that before beginning any project, she must be clear on the expected outcomes. On arrival in the U.S., she was forced to forego her goal of studying medicine due to the cost of that path. Instead, she chose a career she expects will lead to a lucrative salary, while requiring a far lower investment in her education.

Adelle views each college course seriously because it provides knowledge directly related to her life's work. She appreciates her college education as the pathway toward greater financial security for herself, her siblings in DRC, and her future children.

Anya (Pre-nursing major).

Anya emigrated from India with her family when she was about halfway through high school. She works for a fast-food restaurant and is attempting to complete the required coursework to qualify her for an associate-degree program in nursing.

She described her surprise at the cultural differences between India and the United States and the challenges of explaining her commitment to her family's cultural norms. For example, she was frequently asked by fellow students or co-workers about her beliefs about marriage. She explained that in her culture, she is not allowed to date and her parents will choose a husband for her. Until then, Anya will live with her parents until her marriage, which she expects to be arranged by the age of 24 or 25.

Anya learned about the option of attending a community college from a high-school counselor. She was attracted to the idea of the comparatively low tuition, since she knew that her family could not afford the high cost of a university. She takes classes

in English for speakers of other languages and continues to work on her English skills as a second-year student.

Her greatest college challenge so far is her initial failure in an Anatomy and Physiology course required for her program. Her inability to pass the course the first time came as a shock and prompted her to reach out to advisors and professors for help. The experience prompted her to start using tutoring services and other resources, thereby establishing more connections at the college and "getting so much help."

Carter (Cyber Security major).

Carter, a cybersecurity major, expresses a clear preference for hands-on, career-oriented learning. He holds a work-study job at the college, secured the summer before enrollment, which provides career-related experience that complement his coursework. Carter also holds another job at a natural-foods market and is enrolled full-time in courses in his program of study. He lives off-campus in an apartment with roommates and pays all of his own expenses.

Though Carter is well on his way toward earning his associate degree, he does not view himself as a successful student. His assessment is based on his perception of the required general-education courses, which he finds ineffective because they are not tailored to his cybersecurity program.

Carter experienced a severe challenge during his first semester that colored his impression of the college. Due to a flare-up of his ulcerative colitis, he was hospitalized for nearly a month. Despite frequent email updates from his mother, two of his first-semester instructors submitted grades of Administrative Failure due to exceeding the requirements of the course attendance policy. Carter lost respect for those instructors but

appreciated the support he received from others at the college, including instructors for his other classes, supervisors for his work-study job, and advisors from a summer "bridge" program.

Christine (Communication and New Media major).

Christine lives with her parents, commutes to the college, and is enrolled in second-year courses in the Communications and New Media Studies associate-degree program. She is impressed by the welcoming nature of the college and feels that her professors treat students more as adults than her previous high-school teachers. She chose the community college because of its relative low tuition rates and proximity to home. Upon graduating from high school, she considered applying for jobs and was not especially committed to the idea of completing an associate degree. At the time, she had no expectation of transferring to a university for a bachelor's degree.

Christine described a significant change she went through in her first three semesters of college. Through participation in the school newspaper club and other groups, she is connected to a wide circle of friends. She started out with an interest in photography and writing, but through her program was introduced to many other aspects of the communications field, including videography, graphic design, web design, and others. She found all of them interesting and enjoyed the learning experience. She plans to complete her associate degree and is considering transferring to a university to begin a new program in a medical field.

Sophie (Liberal Studies with a Focus in Psychology major).

Sophie emigrated from an Eastern European country after completing high school and waited a year before enrolling in an associate degree program in Liberal Studies with

a focus in psychology. She appreciates the greater educational and economic opportunity in the U.S. as compared to her home country. Sophie describes her home country as a place where teachers had "old fashioned" ideas about their authority in the classroom and students did not have the freedom to choose their own educational paths. Had she stayed there, her choice of major would have been determined by her scores on a standardized test and even after completing a college degree, her chances of gaining professional employment would have been slim.

Sophie describes herself as a highly independent person who performs well under pressure. She plans to transfer to a university to complete a program in forensic psychology, which she hopes will qualify her to work someday as a criminal profiler. Sophie researched the career path extensively and finds the profession fascinating. She works nearly full-time for a retail pharmacy in addition to full-time enrollment in her courses. Sophie was recently elected president of an honor society at the college, which offers her a chance to function as a leader, "not just one who follows."

Data Collection

I used participant interviews to gather data for the study. I followed a semi-structured interview protocol, and recorded and transcribed them using Trint transcription software (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The interview protocol appears in Appendix B. I checked all transcriptions against the recorded interviews to ensure that verbatim transcriptions were used for the data analysis.

I contacted the students selected to participate in the study by phone and email and offered an initial $10 cash stipend to each participant. I asked each student to sign a consent form outlining the purpose of the study and the possible benefits and risks

associated with the study. Participants agreed to be available for three 45-minute interviews to be held during the summer/fall of 2018. On completion of all three interviews, I provided participants an additional $10 cash stipend. All six of the participants successfully completed all three interviews.

I held the interviews at locations away from the community college where students where were enrolled, such as coffee shops or study rooms at the library of a nearby university. I made this choice to protect the privacy of the study participants.

The first interview focused in general on their early college transition experience. These are described as "grand tour" questions by Spradley (1979). I asked participants about their high-school academic experience, their reasons for enrolling in college, early impressions of the college, level of confidence in their academic ability, and level of commitment to their major. This interview also included questions on any difficulty they experienced in managing their time or balancing school with other responsibilities, support or lack of support for their college aspirations from family or friends, and whether, in general, they thought they had made a good decision in enrolling in the college.

The responses to these questions provided initial evidence about the pre-enrollment barriers that each participant faced, as well as their perceptions of how college differed from previous educational experiences. The participants described the situational, dispositional, and institutional characteristics (Ekstrom, 1972) that influenced their early perception of the college experience. While the interview protocol provided consistency and structure to all interviews, follow-up questions also allowed students to provide examples and stories to illustrate their answers.

The second set of interviews focused on the students' experience in the SSC and the advising component. I used these "experience questions" as follow-up queries to the grand-tour questions (Spradley, 1979). I asked students about their impressions of the course, which topics were perceived as helpful or not helpful, which classroom exercises were beneficial, how they perceived the collaboration of the instructor and advisor, and whether they felt "validated" in the classroom.

I asked participants about their perceptions of the individual advising sessions associated with the class, the impact of advising on their experience in other classes, the impact of advising on establishing connections with staff, faculty, or students, and whether they felt the college should continue to offer an advising component with the class.

Due to the focus on the SSC and related advising experience, this set of interviews provided more detail about students' experience in the classroom and the challenges they faced in adjusting to college. For example, some discussed their initial reluctance to ask questions in classes or take advantage of college resources. Some viewed the SSC as a more relaxed environment where they could talk informally with other students and get to know their instructor and advisor. Others, however, experienced an interruption in their relationship with the advisor because of staff turnover or other reasons. The students who encountered a disruption in the advising experience were perceived as "less connected" by the advisor.

For the third interview I probed more deeply into the meaning of their transition-to-college experience (Seidman, 2013). I asked students about their overall impression of their first year of college and to describe the factors that contributed to this assessment. I

asked them to compare their college experience to other times of transition in their lives, how the advising experience supported their academic progress in their programs (if at all), how it influenced their overall sense of connectedness to faculty, staff, and peers (if at all), and how the advising experience might have influenced their overall sense of confidence or "validation."

I also asked students how they felt they had changed since they started college, how engaged they felt as college students, and about the factors that contributed to their overall level of motivation to persist toward graduation.

I conducted a pilot study prior to the start of data gathering, which included interviews with one student who had experienced SSC-based advising. Done between May 20 and June 10, the pilot offered an opportunity to test the interview protocol and gather an initial set of data. The pilot study revealed that the interview protocol was generally well designed and would lead to collection of relevant data. For example, the student in the pilot study discussed his previous lack of engagement in education, incoming obstacles to academic success, and changes in attitude due to clear long-term goals.

The pilot study also helped me fine-tune some interviewing techniques. For example, through bracketing, I learned to refrain from making supporting comments or sounds during the interview and to avoid filling periods of silence with my own observations. A selection of the results from the pilot study is provided in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

For the first step in the data analysis process, as explained by Rossman and Rallis (2017), I read the transcribed interviews in order to become familiar with the general

themes and topics. Once corrected, I uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose, a web-based research analysis platform, which allowed for selective word counts, coding of recurring topics, and identification of themes.

During organization and familiarization, you *immerse* yourself in the data, becoming deeply involved in words, impressions, and the flow of events. Then, let the data sit on the back burner of your mind – that is, let them *incubate.* This leads to *insight* about the salient themes and meaning embedded in the data. (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 237)

The process of coding is described as a process of labeling "chunks of data" using either "generative" or "a priori" codes (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). Generative codes are those that come strictly from the collected data itself. A priori codes are taken from relevant theories or prior research on the subject that is intentionally compared to the new data. I initially conducted this process using a priori codes, or "chunks of data" that addressed aspects of each of the research questions.

First, I reviewed themes from each set of interviews in light of relevant literature. For example, I analyzed the first set of interviews in relation to literature on barriers to higher education. I coded and analyzed the second set of interviews through the lens of models of advising discussed in the literature review, such as the continuum from prescriptive to developmental advising. I considered themes from the final interview in light of the theories of engagement and involvement, also discussed in the literature review.

With feedback from my dissertation committee, I found that this three-part structure for analyzing the findings introduced serious limitations. By creating thematic

silos and matching findings to the literature, it became more difficult to see the interplay of themes across all interviews. It was only after I eliminated these divisions from my analysis that the deeper, underlying themes of the study began to emerge.

The process of data reduction or data "condensation" has been compared to taking a novel and boiling it down to its central idea, captured in a poem. "All analysis entails making judgments about how to reduce the massive amounts of data collected" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 238).

In my revised data analysis process, I grouped participants according to the severity of their pre-college barriers and noted the obstacles and facilitative factors that influenced their early college experiences. Once participants were placed into these categories, I was able to observe similarities and differences in their experiences and identify common themes.

At each interview, I conducted member checks commenting on themes of previous conversations to check the accuracy of assumptions with participants. I also kept records of personal reflections, thought processes behind coding decisions, and rationale for the selection of themes.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a phenomenological study is determined by the degree to which the researcher uses multiple direct quotations from interviews, offers "thick description" of participants' actions or experiences, and provides examples of reflective processes of the researcher, according to Beaudry and Miller (2016).

For these reasons, the study's findings, discussed in Chapter Four, included descriptions of students' personal experiences of barriers, engagement, obstacles, and facilitative events. I used a series of direct quotations from participants to support this

narrative. In Chapter Five, I included my reflective processes that led to the study's findings and conclusions. For example, I analyzed the summary of related literature and compared it to my research findings, which led to conclusions related to themes of engagement and advising.

In order to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative studies, Rossman and Rallis (2017) recommend using "member checks" to allow interviewees to correct, expand on, or challenge the researcher's assumptions. For this reason, I shared the transcripts of interviews with each participant and each was invited to share their perceptions or questions regarding their responses. Only one of the participants responded and raised a concern about the name of her home country being included, since it might make her easily identifiable by readers. The name of the country was therefore removed from the draft.

Risk, Protection, and Confidentiality

The principle of "beneficence" is used in Federal laws and regulations to require that research projects are only conducted if their potential benefits outweigh potential risks (Committee on Revisions, 2014). Prior to conducting the study, I received Institutional Review Board approval of the study's design and components. The process provided the opportunity to evaluate any potential harm to the welfare of the human participants.

Invasion of privacy.

Participants in the study were given adequate information about all the potential risks of the research experience so they could make informed decisions regarding participation. For example, I explained (and included in the consent form) that the

interviews could possibly trigger stressful emotions since students could be recounting difficult or traumatic experiences related to their transition to college. I also stated that every effort would be made to protect the confidentiality of participants, including not using participants' real names. I told participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason.

As was previously noted, I did not conduct interviews on the community college campus, since college staff, faculty, or students might have noticed the meetings and later associated the participants with the study. I also informed participants about the process by which recorded interviews and transcripts of the interviews would be disposed of once the study has been completed. Thus, since I maintained practices that protected the confidentiality of participants throughout the research project, I judged the risk of harm to participants to be moderate and the magnitude or severity of harm, should it occur, to be moderate.

Strengths of the methodology.

No attrition occurred during the interviewing process. All six of the participants participated in the three planned interviews, though some meetings needed to be rescheduled due to unanticipated schedule conflicts. Several factors seemed to contribute to the high participation levels. As noted above, a small stipend of $10 was offered to each student at the first and third interviews. Though some participants initially seemed embarrassed to accept the stipend, all six received the $20 incentive.

I also used the interview protocol as a guide to our conversations but allowed participants to expand on topics that they seemed genuinely interested in sharing. This flexibility seemed to put the participants at ease to some extent and provided me with

greater insight into various aspects of their experience, such as family and cultural influences, personal health or financial challenges, and experiences in the classroom. Efforts to protect participants' privacy also seemed to be well received. For example, after conducting the member checks, one participant shared her concern that if the name of her home country were included, she would be easily identifiable by potential readers. She seemed relieved to learn that the name of the country would be deleted from the manuscript. Such efforts to protect participants' privacy may have contributed toward the lack of attrition during the data gathering phase of the study.

Breach of confidentiality.

Despite efforts to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, I realized that if students' identities were revealed outside the research setting, possible risk to participants could result. For example, private information about sensitive matters such as immigration status, illegal activity, illness, or other matters could potentially cause stress for participants or negatively impact their relationships with family members, friends, college faculty/staff, or affect their legal, academic, residential, or employment status.

Thus, I maintained efforts to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the research process. Real names of participants did not appear on any computerized or physical folders or documents. I did not reveal the identities of participants to any person at the college or elsewhere. I did not reveal the name and location of the college in the study. Thus, in the category of breach of confidentiality, as long as protocols were carefully followed, the risk of harm to participants appeared moderate and the magnitude or severity of harm, should it occur, appeared moderate.

Principle of beneficence.

This discussion of risks of harm associated with the categories of invasion of privacy and breach of confidentiality suggested a moderate risk of harm to participants and a moderate level of magnitude of harm, should it occur. Qualitative research on collaborative efforts to support students during the first semester of study have been identified in the literature as valuable sources of information in designing and improving first-year interventions aimed at enhancing college retention. Due to the social, equity, and personal benefits associated with college persistence, especially for low-income, minority, and first-generation college students, I reached the conclusion that the current study met the standards of the principle of beneficence.

Limitations and Delimitations

I have previously referred to the study's limitations and delimitations. This study was limited by its small pool of six participants. Findings were based upon these participants' experiences. For example, I chose the pool of participants through a criterion sampling method resulting in a participant pool that matched quite well with some of the demographic characteristics of the institution as a whole, but not as well with others. Due to this variation between the participant pool and the population as a whole, the findings cannot be generalized.

The study also included just six participants who had experienced the SSC-based advising model during one semester in the previous year. SSC advisors who offered the services were associated with two different student-success programs, as noted above, which may have led to some variation in their delivery of the model. These factors may

have also impacted the participants' perceptions of their experience and therefore influenced the findings.

Some scholars have long argued against the goal of generalizability for qualitative research, since they said that generalizability is incompatible with the interpretivist paradigm. Denzin (1983) noted, (as cited in Huberman, 2002):

> For the interpretivist every instance of social interaction, if thickly described, represents a slice from the life world that is the proper subject matter for the interpretivist... Every topic... must be seen as carrying its own logic, sense of order, structure, and meaning. (p. 173)

Other scholars, including Goetz and LeCompte, (as cited in Huberman, 2002) contend that even if qualitative studies do not set a goal for generalizability, they are potentially applicable to other situations by providing "comparability" and "translatability." According to the authors, "comparability" refers to:

> ...the degree to which components of a study, including the units of analysis, concepts generated, population characteristics, and settings – are sufficiently well described and defined that other researchers can use the results of the study as a basis for comparison. (p. 179)

Thus, I attempted to provide sufficient detail of participants' lived experience and numerous direct quotations in an effort to clearly convey the core concepts of the study. I hope that this attention to detail will allow other researchers to use this study as a "basis for comparison."

Significant delimitations should also be noted. I only included students who were engaged in their studies and who intended to complete their associate degrees. The study

therefore was not designed to explore the perceptions of students who had voluntarily left the college or had been suspended due to unsatisfactory academic status. It also did not include students who had very little or no interaction with their advisors. Advisors were only asked to provide names of students in the "connected" and "less connected" categories. The study therefore was not designed to explore the experience of students who were "not connected" to advising services at the college. Thus, the findings can offer insight only into the experience of students who were experiencing some degree of success as college students.

Conclusion

I chose a qualitative methodology for the study since this is a preferred method to explore students' own perceptions of their advising experience. A "descriptive interpretive" paradigm allowed me to focus on the individual experience of students in the hope that their perceptions would lead to modest improvements of student-success programming. Based on the principles of phenomenology, students' views were analyzed in order to describe the "universal essence" of the experience (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 252). Since the research was constructivist in nature, I conducted an "epoche" of my own professional experience and remained committed to noticing my own biases throughout the research process (Patton, 2002).

Upon consideration of issues of invasion of privacy and breach of confidentiality, the risks to students appeared moderate in each category and all precautions were taken to protect the confidentiality of participants. Due to the economic, social, and personal benefits of college persistence, I reached the conclusion that the study met the standards of the principle of beneficence.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

Numerous qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted over the past century to explore the phenomenon of college retention. The topic remains one of great concern since college graduation rates remain exceedingly low, especially at community colleges, when completion of meaningful post-secondary credentials has increasingly become a requirement for employment. In fact, most states are working to achieve higher rates of college completion for residents, in large part to boost economic productivity. Since 2011, the U.S. economy has added 11.5 million jobs for those with postsecondary education, but only 80,000 for those with a high school diploma or less (Lumina Foundation, 2019).

The literature review described several seminal studies on college attrition, retention, and persistence. The groundbreaking studies leading to such theories as integration, involvement, and engagement were conducted primarily at residential, four-year institutions. Later work focused on community-college persistence explored the barriers experienced by students, presented the changing demographics of "post-traditional" learners, or offered models such as "sense of belonging" or "validation" to inform institutional policies. Research on related models of advising, such as "advising as teaching," "intrusive or proactive advising," and "the continuum from prescriptive to developmental advising" also informed the current study.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an advising experience offered within the context of a student-success course.

Research Questions

1. What were community-college students' perceptions of their advising experience provided within the context of their success course?

2. How were students' overall college transition experiences influenced, if at all, by their advising experience?

This chapter presents the study's findings: students' perceptions of their transition-to-college experience and the degree to which it was influenced by their advising experience in their first-semester SSC. Once I viewed the qualitative data from the study as a whole, through the process of data condensation, it became clear that two of the study's most prominent themes were "forging connections with networks of support" and "undergoing experiences of personal transformation." All participants experienced high levels of engagement during their early semesters, and they all described pre-enrollment barriers and a series of obstacles. Their descriptions of the meaningful elements of advising were also similar.

The study revealed that students benefited from connection to a supportive network of faculty, staff, and peers, and underwent an experience of personal transformation during the college-transition period. Participants began their college experience with varied motivations, ranging from a deep-seated survival instinct to a more casual interest in learning new skills or preparing for a career path. All participants experienced pre-college barriers, navigated a series of obstacles, established networks of support at the institution, and experienced some degree of personal transformation.

The two participants who experienced the highest level of barriers prior to starting college were most successful at establishing their identities as students, forging effective

supportive networks, and undergoing full personal transformations. The group with "medium-level" barriers experienced a rockier pathway in their early semesters, marked by more severe obstacles, and ultimately emerged on track to persist toward their goals. The student who faced the lowest level of initial barriers also established an identity as a student, made connections with supporters, and experienced personal transformation. Despite her initial ambivalence about pursuing a college degree, by the end of her community-college studies she decided to transfer to a four-year institution to begin a program in a new major.

The findings are presented in *Figure 1*, Obstacles and facilitative processes supporting personal transformation, which represents the fundamental elements of the study discussed in the literature review: student characteristics, obstacles, advising, and resulting changes in student experience. As illustrated in *Figure 1*, participants described facilitative processes, such as interaction with a network of supportive faculty, staff, and peers, which supports personal change.

Community college students enrolled in success course

Facilitative Processes

Personal Transformations

- Mix of traditional and nontraditional students
- Incoming barriers: financial need, health issues, inadequate academic preparation
- Ongoing obstacles: financial stress, juggling studies with a job

- Advising offered in the context of success course
- Social and academic network of support with faculty, disability coordinator, work-study supervisors, and peers

- Greater confidence
- Expansion of interests
- Enhanced sense of agency
- Identity as student

Figure 1. Obstacles and facilitative processes supporting personal transformation.

The first column of *Figure 1* presents the demographic and personal characteristics of participants. The participant pool included traditional and nontraditional students who experienced a range of barriers, including financial hardship, health issues, lack of academic preparedness, and others. Their ongoing obstacles included financial stress and multiple demands on their time.

The participants, described in the first column of *Figure 1*, experienced a particular facilitative process, namely the SSC-based advising model. Though students did speak of aspects of advising discussed in previous research, such as validation and a welcoming environment, participants stressed the value of a network of support. They received guidance from faculty advisors, instructors, work-study supervisors, learning disability specialists, and peers. While participants appreciated the help offered by the

advisor, they viewed this relationship as one element within a constellation of meaningful contacts at the college.

The final column in *Figure 1* represents one outcome of participants' facilitative experiences. Though they did talk about feeling engaged in their studies and committed to earning their college degrees, they each described a deeper sense of personal transformation that influenced all aspects of their lives. Some described it as a greater sense of agency, a new identity as a student, or an enhanced sense of purpose.

While *Figure 1* illustrates the central experience of participants in the study, this chapter is organized according to the severity of incoming barriers experienced by the participants, ranging from high to lower. Within each of these categories, the following elements will be discussed: pre-college barriers; student engagement despite obstacles; perceptions of advising; and experience of personal transformation. The conclusion of each section summarizes students' general reflections on their college transition experiences.

Group I: High Barriers, Deep Transformations

For some study participants, starting college was not merely a step toward greater independence from their parents or immersion in studies in a chosen major. It was a means of survival. The students who overcame the highest level of pre-college barriers, Adam and Adelle, had developed strong levels of motivation and determination as a result of their struggles with pre-college challenges. Their commitment to college persistence was unshakable and failure unthinkable.

These students endured such severe challenges as addiction, homelessness, poverty, lack of family support, and resettlement in the U.S. as an asylum-seeking immigrant. They both achieved high levels of academic engagement in their early college semesters, though they faced such ongoing obstacles as financial stress, failed courses, and difficulty balancing college with work-related demands. In their first semesters, each of the students also benefited from facilitative experiences such as clear goals and career-related employment.

Pre-college barriers.

Adam.

In the decade prior to his enrollment in a program in Electrical and Engineering Technology, Adam experienced a host of severe barriers. At age 38, he had endured more than ten years of addiction to opioids and heroin, resulting in depression and near overdoses. He described the daily experience of addiction as a pattern of extreme high and low emotional states, centered on his drive to acquire and use drugs. The experience of addiction led to a progressive decline in all aspects of Adam's life, including his health, relationships, employment status, living conditions, and financial standing.

> The addiction took everything, slowly. It didn't happen overnight. It took quite a few years for... the regression. I just got to a certain point and then the addiction started to take everything away... About 11 years, 12 years. First thing to go was the good job, and then the long-term relationship, and then the house and the car, and my relationships with my friends and family... And it continued to regress

and or digress I guess into, I ended up being homeless… in and out of the shelters… in tents on the periphery of the city.

The turning point in Adam's life arrived when he was sentenced to jail and was introduced to counselors from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA). He credited these organizations for setting him on a path toward sobriety and prompting a reevaluation of his sense of self-worth.

Once I started realizing… that I deserved better than the life that I had made for myself… I started setting goals, I started making plans for the future. I knew that I had to make a 180-degree change. It had to be all or nothing, you know? And I just knew that I wasn't going to go back... I was willing to do whatever it took to maintain that old lifestyle while I was in it. And then I knew by the time I was going to be released (from jail) that I was going to do whatever it took… to make a better life.

Adam viewed his choice to become sober as the primary turning point in his pre-college life. After that transformation, supported by weekly meetings of AA and NA, he was able to slowly reestablish connections with family members and friends, hold a job, improve his mental and physical health, and set goals for the future. Another pivotal moment arrived when his girlfriend, a college student who had also overcome addiction, left an application to a community college on his kitchen counter.

By the time Adam started college, he had experienced a profound level of personal change that influenced every aspect of his attitude toward education. He described it as a sense of maturity and humility, willingness to seek help and ask questions, and a deep sense of intrinsic motivation for learning.

I thought I knew everything for a long time. I thought I was the smartest guy in the room. I thought I was better than everybody. With a little bit of humble pie I realized I was not even close. And I just took that mindset into college. I said I'm going to ask for help from everybody. It doesn't matter. You know, I'm not going to be embarrassed to say "I don't know."

While Adam found that humility was a key characteristic needed for achieving academic success, Adelle discovered that anger fueled her sense of purpose and determination.

Adelle.

Prior to enrolling at the community college, Adelle, too, had experienced severe barriers. At age 18, she was forced to leave her home country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, due to political unrest and threats of violence. She emigrated with weak English language skills but with exceptional ability in math and science. Like Adam, Adelle was forced by life circumstances to reevaluate her own attitudes, develop her identity as a student, and seek assistance when she needed it.

And you know when you're thinking about all those things (being forced to leave your home country) you really get mad about life and you do things because you want to succeed in life. So that makes you a really determined person and a really passionate person… Besides that I'm also a person who doesn't want to fail and I don't like failure.

Without ongoing emotional or financial support of her family, Adelle enrolled in high school and began to explore her options for the future. She soon realized that the cost of education would dictate her choices.

> I was accepted in many colleges but they only gave me half of the… tuition so I wasn't able to pay the other half. Then they proposed to me that we had community college here… where it's really cheap, where you can start from the beginning and then when you're going to work, you're going to have money to pay for… tuition and transfer.

Adelle's lack of financial resources also impacted her selection of a major. When she left her home country, she had hoped to study medicine, but learned in the U.S. that the process would be long and costly. She therefore decided to study biotechnology, a field where she could apply her interest in the sciences and qualify for what she considered a lucrative job within just a few years. She viewed these clear career goals as the first step toward supporting herself financially and attaining scholarship support for her education.

> It's a goal that you set before even starting something… before starting school, you have to know what your goals are. Like your objectives, what do you want to get at the end of this? Before starting at (the community college) I had to set my goals that I have… I need a diploma. I need this because if I get a diploma, I'll get a good job and when I'll get a good job, I can buy a house, I can buy a car, a good car and I can prepare the really good things for my kids.

Thus, the participants who experienced "high barriers," such as addiction and poverty prior to college enrollment, experienced a series of obstacles and facilitative events along their pathway through their early semesters. Their obstacles included financial stress and difficulty balancing work with college demands. Facilitative experiences included clear long-term goals and career-related jobs.

Student engagement despite obstacles.

Students in the "high barrier" group experienced facilitative effects from their high intrinsic motivation for their studies and genuine interest in learning. Both participants benefited from nearly full-time employment, since it helped meet their financial needs, though their work schedules cut down on time available for their studies.

Adam.

With an interest in the trades, Adam initially considered programs that would prepare him for work as a plumber or electrician. Uncertainty about his long-term goal was an early obstacle that impacted engagement. Early in his first semester, he also questioned the value of an associate degree and wondered whether the benefits would outweigh the financial and personal costs. His definition of success included strengthening his relationship with his young daughter and gaining marketable skills that would allow him to earn more than $12 or $13 per hour, an income level he described as "a fairly bleak existence." After consulting with faculty, advisors, and peers, he chose the Electrical Engineering Technologies program, which he found appealing since it was designed to prepare students for what Adam described as lucrative technical jobs at local engineering companies.

I mean, ultimately financial motivation is paramount, I think. You have to start being an adult at some point. And… being an adult requires having money for things and having a good job, you know?

Adam also started college with very high standards for his own academic achievement. Throughout his early semesters, he remained focused on his goals and vigilant about deadlines. He described himself as a "hero student" who completed every assignment, sat in the front of each class, and asked questions. He received a steady stream of high grades, which he found empowering, but at the same time he grew weary from many hours of homework with little personal time.

> The sacrifices of time really I think has been probably the most challenging part, I would say. And really I think it comes down to change. You know it's a pretty drastic change from, especially, you know, three, four, five years ago. But even in the last couple of years… even in sobriety, kind of veering off… and changing everything really is pretty scary. [laughs]

Adam described himself as a "sponge," soaking in technical knowledge and developing skills in his trade. He also enjoyed English, philosophy, and history courses, which broadened his intellectual interests and strengthened his writing skills. It therefore came as a painful surprise to encounter failure in a physics course, despite repeated efforts to master the material and communicate with the instructor.

> Well the physics class was, you know, that was probably the most humbling experience I've had. [laughs]   Unfortunately but it was a learning experience for sure. I think, not to say that my classes have been easy so far but, you know,

some of the subject matter has been quite difficult. But it hasn't been back-breaking, mind-blowingly hard, in my opinion. And that (physics course) was.

After his first few semesters, he began working as an electrician, which provided hands-on training that complemented his coursework. As he fine-tuned his study skills, he completed coursework more efficiently and squeezed more personal time out of each week. Adam experienced a high level of academic engagement in his early semesters while he navigated a series of challenges and was buoyed up by facilitative experiences. Adelle, too, was propelled forward in her studies by a sense of intrinsic motivation.

Adelle.

Like Adam, Adelle described herself as a serious student with passion for her chosen course of study. She viewed every academic experience as a chance to hone her career-related skills in biotechnology. "When you love your major, you love everything that it's composed with," she said.

Clear long-term goals were Adelle's guiding principles. Even in her first undergraduate courses, she viewed herself as a professional-in-the-making and realized that her future career success depended on knowledge and skill acquisition. Her intrinsic interest in the subject was amplified by her desire for financial stability for herself and her future family. She started working nearly full-time to pay for her own rent, tuition, and expenses but found it nearly impossible to save toward tuition for her four-year college degree or other goals.

You know I go to work, I have two jobs… I go to school. I have to pay rent, I have to pay (for) clothes for myself, I have to pay my tuition… Sometimes I also

have to look after my siblings who are in Congo, think about them maybe coming here and get the high education that I'm getting here in the United States.

A high point in her college-transition experience occurred when she was awarded a scholarship through a non-profit organization that would cover her community-college tuition. She was encouraged by advisors and faculty members to apply for the grant and viewed the experience as exceptionally validating.

> I made some connections, I made some friends who became a family for me. And I also made some connections with my teachers who were always advising me like 'you're a smart girl, if you work this way you're going to get what you want. Just believe in yourself, we know you're going to do it.'

Like Adam, Adelle also described the exhaustion of balancing nearly full-time work with full-time coursework. By her second year, she was working at a restaurant and also on the staff of a biotechnology firm in order to get hands-on training in her field. Through these early semesters, she reminded herself that her top priority was academic achievement. Like Adam, Adelle's daily life as a college student was guided by a fierce determination to succeed, fueled by memories of previous personal hardship. Each day, she reminded herself to remain vigilant because her survival depended on it.

> When I go back home (at the end of the day), I know that I have to study, because every time that I'm home, I'll sit in front of my computer and open my emails and check on my homework. And I know that I have to get it done because if I don't get it done… I'll get a zero… If get a zero, then I'll get an "F" at the end of this

class... So if I fail, my GPA is going to go low and if my GPA is low... I won't be eligible for any scholarship.

The students who experienced high pre-enrollment barriers to higher education maintained a high level of engagement in their studies despite such obstacles as financial stress and difficulty balancing work and college. They were supported by clear long-term goals and work experiences aligned with their chosen majors.

Perceptions of advising.

Like all students who experienced the SSC-based advising model, Adam and Adelle were introduced to their advisors through their required first-semester SSC. The advisor assigned to Adelle, however, left the college less than one month into the fall semester. Adelle established a good working relationship with a new SSC advisor, though the new advisor considered Adelle "less connected" because of her infrequent participation in advising meetings. Both participants in the "high barrier" group described four dimensions of advising that were especially helpful: a welcoming environment; connections with faculty, staff, and peers; help with academic planning; and boosted self-confidence. In Adelle's case, meetings with the SSC advisor were less frequent than for Adam.

Adam.

At the start of the student-success course, Adam appreciated the welcoming attitude of the SSC instructor-advisor team. They kept the atmosphere light and led small-group exercises and activities on such topics as time-management and library research skills. He noticed that other students spent much of the class time on their

phones, but Adam attempted to connect with the instructor and take advantage of the services offered by the advisor. He initially talked with his SSC advisor mostly about academic planning and course selection and eventually also established a strong working relationship with his faculty advisor.

> Yeah. (My SSC advisor's) been so great. Like so helpful… any time I stopped by her office, she puts what she's doing on hold. She helps me out (when) I have questions about scheduling… What I should do, if I should do this before that?

Both his SSC instructor and advisor were complimentary about his writing and encouraged him to submit essays to the college newspaper. As he became more acquainted with his SSC advisor, he began to view her as a source of emotional support at stressful times. He stopped in often to see her, even when he didn't have specific questions about academic planning.

> I mean there was a bit of motivation there from (my advisor). She's very, like 'go get em'… A couple of times I went to her and I was like, oh gosh, these classes are getting really hard, and I don't know how I'm going to manage the time. And she said 'Well make sure you do this this and this, and stick with your goals, and stick to the timeline you've set. Keep doing what you're doing and don't be so hard on yourself.'

His SSC advisor encouraged Adam to meet with faculty advisors in his Electrical Engineering Technologies program and helped with problem-solving when difficulties arose in his classes. He therefore viewed her as a key member of his personal network of support, which included instructors, faculty advisors, research librarians, and others. She

also brainstormed with him ways he could reach out to other students who'd experienced similar life challenges. They discussed the possibility of Adam organizing a campus event for students in recovery.

> (She) even suggested perhaps starting a group – either a recovery based type of group, for students in recovery. Or, I don't know, students of advanced age like myself that might feel like they're on the periphery a little bit. Or maybe not necessarily either, just helping people navigate, just sharing my path to success really, you know?

For Adam, the SSC advisor provided meaningful advice and ongoing emotional support. At first, Adelle viewed advising as a friendly experience that allowed her to make connections with fellow students.

Adelle.

Adelle viewed the SSC as one aspect of her college experience that created a welcoming environment for students. She described it as a more informal class that offered the opportunity to get to know her peers and talk about their own lives. Other experiences on campus that contributed to this accepting environment were a free welcome barbecue hosted by residence life, and faculty members' practice of learning students preferred names and having them introduce themselves at the first few class meetings of each semester.

> When in the (success) class… we had time to talk with each other and also help others with their homework, make friends, so I think that's really helpful and it's

also a path to make people successful in life. Because… other people are going to push you and help you to make your weakness your strength.

Due to the early departure of her first SSC advisor from the college, Adelle did not have access to regular advising meetings from the start of the semester. She therefore took the initiative to seek out the help of her faculty advisor. Once acquainted with her new SSC advisor, she primarily contacted her for help with academic planning.

She has really been helpful for me for choosing my classes for the spring semester. I did it with her and any time that I had difficulties, I would go and see her and talk about my classes and stuff. And so all the classes that I chose, we (talked about together) in her office.

Like Adam, Adelle's SSC advisor referred her to other people at the college who could answer her questions, such as faculty advisors or staff who oversaw a program of work-related, non-credit courses. She was given the name of a transfer counselor at a nearby university who could answer her questions about their bachelor's degree program in biotechnology. Her SSC advisor also encouraged Adele to apply for scholarship awards and wrote letters of recommendation to submit with her applications.

Adelle also relied on her SSC advisor when she was questioning her abilities or feeling defeated. She found that when advisors and instructors showed confidence in her abilities, they supported her own experience of engagement and persistence. She especially appreciated support from advisors who were aware of the high priority she placed on her career goals. She viewed each of her courses as a stepping stone toward a professional career and appreciated advisors who kept this attitude in mind.

Like showing you that what you're doing is really important for your life and it's not just going to stop at the end of the semester when you get a grade A or a grade B, but it's going to help you in the future, it's going to help you, it's in your career. They have to show us that what we're doing is our life.

Since Adam and Adelle are both highly determined to succeed in college, they take the initiative to forge their own connections with faculty, staff, and peers. Both of these students who experienced highly challenging pre-college barriers found that SSC and faculty advisors help connect them with supporters at the college, contribute toward a welcoming atmosphere, provide academic-planning help, and offer emotional support that boosts their self-confidence.

Experience of personal transformation.

Adam.

For Adam, the decision to enroll in college was partly a byproduct of a previous experience of self-transformation. As noted previously, his recovery from addiction and commitment to sobriety set the stage for a new phase of life. He had started the process of facing his fears, setting goals, and reconnecting with family and friends. College represented an opportunity to more fully embrace his intellectual interests, gain professional skills, and forge connections with a wide network of supporters. When he first started, he wondered whether a college degree was even possible or worth the trouble. Within a few semesters, however, he discovered that education had changed his world.

I didn't give myself a chance for a long time, for a very long time. And ah, once I realized that I am worth happiness and I am worth seeking happiness, then I just decided to do it a hundred percent... put the pedal down and get it.

A significant part of his transformation was the realization that he truly enjoyed learning and that even at his "advanced age" of 38, he was capable of gaining new skills in areas such as academic writing, history, philosophy, math, and electrical engineering. He experienced a sense of pride to take his place beside others in his family who had achieved success in higher education.

My grandfather of course was an electrical engineer... and I guess there were quite a few people with degrees. My aunt just finished her master's in education. My grandmother was a teacher. So, I guess maybe that's been a motivation too... I never ever really vocalized that before... to get up there in the ranks with my educated family.

Thus, Adam's college transformation includes a widening of intellectual interests, pride in accomplishments, and a deepening sense of self-worth. By his second year of college, he is earning a higher salary due to his education and he looks forward to wider career opportunities after graduation.

Adelle.

Adelle, too, described the transformation she experienced during her early semesters of college. Like Adam, her previous experiences of poverty and separation from her family resulted in deep personal change. Even before starting college, she had a passionate commitment to her long-term goals and strong determination to succeed,

regardless of the obstacles. Once she began interacting with a supportive network of instructors, advisors, and peers, she grew more confident in her abilities and optimistic about her future. She recalled the thrill of being chosen as a scholarship recipient from a pool of more than a hundred applicants.

> Yeah it felt really good and there were a lot of people because they organized a conference. It was like a party and they invited people and there was food and everything... It makes you proud when you're awarded in front of a lot of people... So I was so happy and proud of myself.

She anticipated that her commitment to her studies would not only qualify her for a job in her field, but for positions of leadership as well. Since she took her classes seriously and applied her knowledge in a career-related job, she was already experiencing her professional life. She intends to complete a bachelor's degree in order to raise her qualifications and she foresees a day when she will share the rewards of her professional success with her future family.

> I know that whatever I'm going to do, I'm going to grow up or get married and I'll need my kids to be well, you know. I won't need my kids to live in bad situation because I didn't want to go to school.

The two participants who experienced the highest levels of pre-college challenges emerged as successful students who established a strong work ethic, were already employed in career-related roles, and experienced an enhanced level of confidence. They were persisting toward graduation, had established meaningful networks of support, and had undergone significant personal transformation. They described their advising

experience as one contributor toward their college success, along with the maturity and determination they gained from overcoming deep hardships.

Group II: Medium Barriers, Greater Obstacles

At the "medium" level, students' pre-college barriers were comparatively less severe than those in the first group. For example, two of the students emigrated from foreign countries but did so with family members who provided housing and financial support upon resettlement in the U.S. These students also experienced setbacks due to a lack of academic preparation and financial hardships. Surprisingly, this group of students experienced more significant obstacles along their pathway through the first few semesters than students in the "high barrier" group.

Their first semesters were rockier due to such obstacles as hospitalization for a serious illness, short-term housing difficulty, lack of self-confidence, and the need for developmental (or pre-college) courses. At the same time, the facilitative elements influencing their college-transition experience were also more robust than the students in the first group. These participants enjoyed greater levels of support from their families at times of difficulty and were able to forge networks of support from such sources as work-study supervisors, pre-college summer bridge program staff, and faculty advisors.

Pre-college barriers.
Sophie.

Sophie, with her family members, emigrated to the U.S. from an Eastern European country after graduating from high school, more than a year prior to starting college. She viewed resettlement in the U.S. as a route toward greater academic freedom

and economic opportunity. Had she stayed in her home country, the results of a

standardized test would have determined her college major and her career prospects

would have been limited. Her family struggled financially in her home country and

Sophie appreciated a chance to start her college education in a more prosperous economy.

She hoped that a career as a criminal profiler would lead to greater financial stability than

her family had previously achieved.

> Yeah my life (in home country) wasn't easy honestly. My dad was almost always
>
> unemployed. Even when he would get employed, the people would just not give
>
> him the pay they needed to give him… Here you get paid two hundred dollars in
>
> one week or something with the minimum wage and there you get paid two
>
> hundred dollars in a whole month. But it's totally different because the prices
>
> there are also lower… but still it was really hard. So we just kind of learned to
>
> appreciate what we had and get along with what we had... Well even here I feel
>
> like everything I do in my life is the hard way but I'm used to it so if it's not the
>
> hard way, I think something's wrong.

She described a close relationship with family members who had waited for the

opportunity to relocate to the U.S. for more than 14 years after initially filing

applications. Though she was uncertain of her career goal when she started college, she

appreciated the freedom to explore various academic areas and choose her own area of

concentration. She also described the corruption and stagnation of the educational

system in her home country.

> Since the first day (at the community college) I just saw how friendly the teachers
>
> were. They were very different from teachers in (my home country). They're

kind of old fashioned and just go straight by the book, it's just memorizing stuff, instead of really learning them. So that's what I really liked about (college).

Thus, Sophie began college with a high level of engagement because she'd emerged into a new educational and economic system that allowed her a far greater level of personal autonomy and self-determination. Once removed from her home country's inflexible system of higher education, she followed her own intrinsic interests toward a self-designed major and career path. Like Sophie, Carter also started college with high levels of intrinsic motivation.

Carter.

Carter participated in his American high-school's vocational program, which allowed him to focus in his area of interest, computer science. He completed certificates in IT-related subjects and was able to gain career-related work experience. However, Carter discovered that his previous education had not prepared him for the comparatively higher coursework expectations in college. For example, based on his placement test scores, he was placed into a developmental (or pre-college) level of math.

You go from an environment where… sure you have homework in quotation marks that's due and that it's somewhat graded, but you're not put on a thing called the GPA where your grades actually do matter, it will affect you.

During his vocational high-school program, Carter decided on a long-term career goal of cybersecurity and a short-term goal of working for the college IT department while enrolled as a student. Support from a family member helped him to achieve the latter goal even before the start of his first semester.

And I wanted that position and what was good about that was my mom created a folder with all my IT related stuff to it. And when I went into the interview I dropped that and I guess that propelled me because if you talk to my supervisors, they'll be like, 'Yeah that was actually a professional thing to do to, show actually the work history.'

Concern over the cost of college and his eventual level of educational debt influenced Carter's decision to attend the community college rather than enrolling at a nearby university. Carter's work-study position provided support that turned out to be a highly significant advantage once an unexpected health crisis led to his hospitalization for nearly a month of his first semester. Like Carter, Anya also chose to attend community college due to its relative low cost.

Anya.

Anya lived in India until age 16, when she emigrated with her family to join several extended family members who had previously resettled in the U.S. Anya chose the career goal of nursing because of a tragic accident that occurred at a festival in India when she was about six years old. Her grandfather was setting off firecrackers for his grandchildren when a fire was ignited. Her grandfather was badly burned, an event that influenced Anya's life trajectory.

At that time it was too late to take him to the hospital so he got really burned and after a few months he died. So I was like, if I can be a nurse, I can try to help somebody else who is not in a good condition to go to a hospital. So I really wanted to be a nurse. And that's what made me want to go to school and study further to make sure my family is happy with what I'm doing.

Adjusting to American culture was not an easy process for Anya. She attended high school for two years in the U.S. prior to enrolling in college. At the time, her English skills were limited, and she was confronted by countless cultural differences. Whereas in her home country only a handful of women drove cars, in the U.S. all her friends had earned their driver's licenses. American women wore shorts, chose their own boyfriends, and ate hamburgers. She described times when she was surrounded by curious teenagers who wanted to hear more about her home country where women were placed into arranged marriages.

> And they will ask me, 'how do you get married? How old do you have to be?' I was like… my family thinks that I, when I'm 23 or 24, I'll get married. And they're like, 'who is going to choose the husband then?' My parents. And they're like, 'how can you marry someone you don't like though, don't love?'… I grew up in my culture and I know everyone gets married like this so I'm okay with that… It is your parents (who) find someone for you, not you.

Her educational experience in the U.S. was dramatically different from what she had known before immigrating. In her home country, strict rules governed everything from seating arrangements to curriculum. Teaching methods stressed memorization and students were given few opportunities to tailor their studies to their own interests.

> Up here, I find teachers really respectful, really helpful, and they will understand the situation in everything for homework. But in India they won't, they're like 'You have to do this. You have to do that.' If we ask them… Can you repeat this again, they're like 'Why can't you pay attention when we just did it? Why are you coming back here again?' They're really tough and hard to understand.

Anya's college decisions have been determined by financial limitations. She knew that her family would not be able to afford the high tuition of a university and gladly followed her guidance counselors' advice to start at a community college.

Thus, in the "medium barrier" group, students experienced significant barriers such as financial need, lack of adequate academic preparation, and challenging cultural adjustments. Such barriers influenced students' transition-to-college experiences since some were required to take pre-college courses in English or math and some needed to work full-time in addition to being enrolled in college full-time.

Student engagement despite obstacles.

Sophie.

Sophie describes herself as a highly independent, strong-willed person who functions well under pressure and holds an interest in psychology. Her original choice of major was computer science, but during her college orientation program, she changed her mind since that career path sounded too isolating. During her first semester, she realized through her psychology courses, independent reading, and documentary-viewing that she was interested in studying the criminal mind. After researching possible career paths, she decided to eventually complete a bachelor's degree in forensic psychology in order to become a criminal profiler.

> I have done a lot of research and I like what they do, just figuring out who the person is by the crime they've committed and why they committed the crime… (Profilers need to) have a general idea of what his childhood, his or her childhood might have been and… it's very fascinating to me.

Sophie experienced obstacles during her first few semesters. She'd made good friends while living in the dorm during her first year but by the following fall, all of her friends had left the school either to take time off or transfer elsewhere. Since she was working two part-time jobs during the summer following her first year, she forgot to apply for campus housing and ended up with no housing placement, with only days left before the start of school.

> I was working… 50 hours a week between my two jobs. And (the housing application) just totally slipped my mind. And so… the first week I had to commute two hours every day to get here. And it was funny because two days before school starting I was coming (to the college) to talk about the housing situation and my car broke down and the engine exploded. So I had two days to find and buy a new car… It was the worst, it was the worst.

Once she found a room to rent not far from campus, Sophie settled back into her usual pattern of getting all her assignments done on time. She enjoyed several of her general-education courses, such as history and philosophy, in addition to her psychology courses. She faced challenges in academic planning, however, because faculty advisors in both the psychology and criminal justice departments did not know about programs in forensic psychology and could not provide accurate information about transfer. Sophie therefore sought out guidance from her SSC advisor and from transfer counselors from universities. She eventually learned about out-of-state programs that would meet her needs.

Most of the teachers didn't even know about my major because it's a newer major I think, the forensic psychology one. So when I asked the psychology teacher and my advisor... they didn't really know what I needed in order to pursue that career.

Sophie's transition-to-college experience was enhanced by her connections to peers and a network of supportive faculty and staff, but she also experienced a series of obstacles including confusion about her major, short-term lack of access to housing, and challenges of juggling her studies with her work schedule. Like Sophie, Carter faced significant challenges during his first year of college.

Carter.

Carter's experience in his first few semesters included a strong sense of academic engagement along with serious obstacles. His work-study job for the college IT department anchored his academic learning to real-world practice and served as a perfect complement to his in-class learning. Despite this promising start to his first semester, Carter went through a health crisis requiring a month-long hospitalization, which led to physical, emotional, and academic repercussions. After attending an on-campus event with members of the IT Department, Carter experienced a flare-up of his chronic ulcerative colitis, causing pain and bleeding.

If I went probably another couple days, I would have been dead. I lost too much blood, had to get a blood transfusion. A blood transfusion and a colonoscopy all at the age of 18. So hey I got my sense of community... I got self-worth and

value and validation from that because people when I came back, were like 'where the hell did you go? We miss you.'

While hospitalized, Carter's mother communicated with his instructors, offering updates on his condition and explaining his likely timetable for returning to class. She kept each of his faculty members notified of signs of his improvement and his doctors' reports on anticipated discharge dates. By the time Carter was well enough to return to his classes, two of his four instructors had submitted Administrative Failure grades. (The grade of Administrative Failure or AF, can be given by faculty when a student has missed more classes than the attendance policy allows.) Carter worked with an academic dean and disability coordinator to appeal the grading decisions. One of the two AF grades was submitted by his SSC instructor.

> All I'm going to say is… I lost respect for that teacher when she's like, 'oh yeah by the way I'm thinking about "AF'ing" you.' I just lost my respect. First off, you just don't do that to a student… One, you're getting emails from that student saying 'hey I am out.' Two, you need some sort of academic dean or a disabilities coordinator to actually tell you – 'guess what, you can't do that.'

Despite this disruptive and emotionally charged experience in the first month of his college experience, Carter completed three of his four classes. By his second semester, he had accomplished other milestones, such as establishing friendships with peers, solidifying relationships with his work-study supervisors, and successfully completing courses in his chosen concentration. Other obstacles emerged, however, due to his view of the general-education requirements in his major.

Sure I'm getting my degree but for me to get there, taking general education where general education is pushed more than the actual degree, I don't feel like I'm successful. I just don't. But me doing other hobbies and seeing my actual progression in that, then yes I am successful in that way.

Carter's first-semester experience was a roller-coaster ride of engaged learning, community-building, and what he viewed as undeserved failure and unnecessary general-education program requirements. While he found support through college administrators, he still ended up failing a college course for reasons he felt were unjustified. Like Carter and Sophie, Anya started college with a high level of engagement, though she described herself as shy and reluctant to ask questions or seek help.

Anya.

Anya felt fully committed to her goal of completing the pre-requisites in order to qualify for the college's nursing program. Since she lived at home and received support from her family, she only needed to work part-time, which allowed her to focus most of her attention on her studies. Despite these advantages, however, she experienced challenging obstacles during her early semesters.

Anya's academic obstacles included a need for developmental, or pre-college coursework in English and math. Her difficulties in these two core subjects also contributed to challenges in her first nursing-related science course, Anatomy and Physiology, where she struggled to comprehend concepts and memorize the vocabulary. She realized about halfway through the course that she was failing, and arranged a meeting with her faculty advisor, who suggested that she withdraw and register for the

course again the subsequent semester. This setback initiated a period of self-reflection for Anya and prompted her to begin using college resources more frequently. When asked why she was motivated to ask questions in classes and seek help in the tutoring center, she responded:

> My problems. If I didn't have my problems or any queries I wouldn't have gone to that person and I didn't know them. But… in my first semester I had so many problems like looking for people, getting help and everything, so now I know whom do I have to go. If I didn't have any problem or issues with my homework, or assignments or my classes, I wouldn't have gone to them and I wouldn't have known them.

Anya found that her degree of success as a learner was strongly influenced by the teaching styles of her instructors. When she first attempted Anatomy and Physiology, for example, the instructor primarily relied on lectures supported by PowerPoint presentations. Her second attempt at the course was far more successful with a more flexible instructor who encouraged student interaction.

> We feel like, 'oh he's trying to help us out. He's trying to make us feel comfortable in class and study. He's not saying that (we shouldn't) study but he's saying study in your own comfort.' But in my other class, we only have to sit and watch her, we can't even ask the person right next to us if they took notes… she'll be like 'oh I'm talking, don't talk in between.' You know we're just taking notes, but that's what she was making us feel like.

Anya described her commitment to completing a nursing degree, despite the program's challenging prerequisites, including a standardized exam that assesses students' proficiency in math, English, anatomy, and physical sciences. By her second year, she had heard from a friend about the option of transferring to a university program in nursing, which would allow her to complete a bachelor's degree in nursing. Anya's long-term goal was still a nursing degree, but now her short-term goals were uncertain. Due to her adherence to her Indian culture, she also felt confident that her needs would be met even if she experienced delays along her academic path.

> Up here they have their own boyfriends and they get married to them, but in my culture your family will find your partner for you and they will make sure he has everything that you need in your life. So it's not like you're going to get married and then he has nothing and you're going to be homeless or like you have to work all the time to get money for yourself. It's not like that.

Participants in the "medium barrier" group therefore experienced high levels of engagement in their chosen disciplines and also encountered more significant academic, health, and financial obstacles in their early semesters than participants in the "high barrier" group. In some cases, the challenges helped students to reassess their attitudes and become more successful students.

Perceptions of advising.

Not all participants in the "medium barrier" group experienced continuous access to advising services. Like Adelle in the "high barrier" category, Carter's advising experience in his first semester was interrupted. Carter's month-long hiatus from his SSC

due to hospitalization, the SSC instructor's subsequent choice to give him a failing grade, and his attempt to appeal the grade all contributed to his "lack of respect" for the SSC instructor and "less connected" status with his SSC advisor. As noted previously, all six participants interacted with an instructor-advisor team in their SSC. The other two participants in this group, Sophie and Anya, were considered "connected" by their SSC advisors and did not experience an interruption in services.

Sophie and Anya experienced the same four meaningful dimensions of advising as participants in the "high barrier" group: a welcoming environment; help with academic planning; connections with faculty, staff, and peers; and boosted self-confidence. For these students, the SSC advisor was instrumental in providing support in all four areas. Carter also experienced three of these four aspects of support, but they were mostly provided by other members of the college community including an academic dean, disabilities coordinator, work-study supervisor, Summer Academy advisor, and others. (Summer Academy is the college's name for its "summer bridge program," an academic refresher experience for students placed into at least one developmental or pre-college course.)

Sophie.

Sophie enjoyed the collaboration of the SSC instructor-advisor team in her student-success course and felt that it provided a welcoming environment for students. The course offered the chance for Sophie to get to know her SSC advisor, who started each class with an informal conversation about any challenges they were facing as they adjusted to college. The pedagogy used in the SSC, such as small-group activities and

discussions, fostered interaction and provided students opportunities to get to know one another.

> You have that idea that you have to just be quiet (in other courses) and sit there and not talk to anybody else. That's what I actually do in all my classes. That class (the SSC) was the only one that I had a chance to really talk to other people. So I feel like it'd be nice if there was an advisor in every class.

In regular meetings with her SSC advisor, Sophie felt comfortable talking about all aspects of her life at the college, including academics, work, and social interactions. She therefore viewed her SSC advisor as her primary source of academic support at the college and met infrequently with her faculty advisor.

> So (we would) just go through how I was doing during that moment of the semester and she would ask me if there was any class I was having problems with. Or even just about my work because I started working in the billing office too. So she would ask me about that and just even like stuff in general, how like my social life was going (or) living in the dorms. Yeah about pretty much everything.

Once Sophie had chosen her long-term goal of completing a bachelor's degree in forensic psychology, she tried meeting with faculty advisors but was disappointed to find that faculty from both departments could not answer her questions. She therefore returned to her SSC advisor who referred her to a transfer counselor from a nearby university who offered guidance.

> So when I asked the psychology teacher and my advisor… they didn't really know what I needed in order to pursue that career. They told me to go to the

criminal justice department and talk to the advisor there but he told me to go to the psychology department. I was going back and forth. They really didn't know.

Thus, through her advising experience, Sophie experienced all four dimensions of advising considered important by other participants: a welcoming environment, connections to peers and faculty; boosting of self-confidence, and help with academic planning. As noted above, Carter did experience a welcoming community at the college, but he did not receive all four aspects of advising from his association with his SSC advisor.

Carter.

The instructor of Carter's SSC gave him a failing grade after missing nearly half of the class meetings by the time he was released from the hospital. Upon returning to school, he did not continue meeting regularly with either the SSC instructor or advisor and he also chose not to meet with his faculty advisor.

> …My validation was that even though I got "AF'ed" out of one class, my three
>
> other professors were like 'At least you're alive, get your work in just before the
>
> semester (ends), we'll call it a day and then hopefully you get better.'

Carter felt that he established a sense of community at the college through his work-study job in the IT Department and the Summer Academy program. Those two experiences connected him with faculty, staff, and peers, and provided him with a network of support at the college. He also received support from an academic dean and disability coordinator after returning from his hospitalization. He did not, however, find helpful advice from his assigned faculty advisor, who was the chairperson of his

academic department. "In my world she, how do I put this nicely, doesn't know what she's doing," he said.

The differing experiences of Carter and Sophie point to the study's underlying theme that the advising experience was just one of many ways for students to forge connections at the college community. While the SSC-based advising model was positively perceived by most participants, others successfully achieved their goals with other forms of support.

Anya.

Like Sophie, Anya found that the collaboration between the instructor and advisor in the SSC helped create a welcoming atmosphere where students felt comfortable participating in conversations. She found that having two facilitators for the class was helpful because if she didn't understand one person, she could seek out assistance from the other.

I think the two different teachers will help you out more because you will get to listen more from two different perspectives, everything from two different people. And it's like teamwork, you know? So they don't get frustrated or tired or, so you will understand more if you have any question you can go to one or the other.

At first, Anya sought the help of her SSC advisor to choose her classes and complete the steps to qualify for admittance to the nursing program. Once she started experiencing academic setbacks in her first semester, she turned to her SSC advisor for advice on how to improve her study skills. She was referred to services such as the Learning Commons, tutoring center, and her faculty advisor. Throughout this period of

academic challenges, she relied on her SSC instructor and SSC advisor, who told her she would someday be a great nurse.

> Yeah it makes you more proud of yourself and you know that you're going on the right way that's why people are telling you the good words you know? And that makes you feel like alright if people are thinking I'm doing great things, then I don't have to lose hope or anything. I can do more and more in my life.

Therefore, two participants in this group experienced valuable support from the advising associated with their SSC in all four dimensions: a welcoming environment; help with academic planning; connections with faculty, staff, and peers; and boosted self-confidence. The third participant used his experience in his work-study position and a summer bridge program to establish a network of support at the college.

Experience of personal transformation.

The three participants in the "medium barrier" group described the transformation they'd undergone by their second year of college. While they navigated such obstacles as financial stress, academic setbacks, and health problems, they noticed a growing sense of self-confidence and deepening connection to a helpful network of peers, staff, and faculty members.

Sophie.

Sophie defined personal transformation as a growing sense of accomplishment and confidence. When she first started college, she viewed herself as hesitant, unsure of her abilities, and unclear about her long-term goals. Once she experienced success in her courses and finalized her choice of major, she began to see her pathway through college

more clearly. She could see that, unlike her previous life experience in her home country, in the U.S., she could set goals and create a life of opportunity.

> I feel like obviously getting used to school is very important, also changing your mindset, and I was the kind of person who hesitated a lot and now I do not. Even when I hesitate, I still go for it and… I just like to challenge myself… and try to get to where I want to.

After deciding to get involved in extra-curricular activities during her second year of college, Sophie was elected president of an honor society, and experienced an enhanced sense of purpose working on community projects to benefit fellow students. The group decided to focus on improving the college food pantry, which provided support to students experiencing food insecurity.

> As soon as I got elected… my whole attitude towards it changed. I wasn't as nervous or as frightened that I wouldn't be able to make it. I felt more confident and I felt like I could see myself doing that and not being someone who just follows… It's very important to me for some reason… just the idea of helping the community and the students.

As Sophie continued to explore her transfer options, her higher level of self-efficacy and confidence also emerged. She found other colleges that offered combined programs in psychology and criminal justice, completed her applications and looked forward to a new phase in her life. Similarly, Carter was experiencing a shift in his identity as a student.

Carter.

By his second year at the college, Carter noticed that he had undergone a significant change. For him, it involved deepening relationships with a network of friends, new opportunities to develop skills related to his hobbies, and simultaneous sense of accomplishment over financial independence. He added a job at a natural-food market to his already busy schedule of work-study hours and full-time coursework. The additional income allowed him to live in an off-campus apartment and fulfill his goal of supporting himself.

> It's a learning curve that (needs) to be done because you can't be sheltered all your life. You need to learn, okay this is when rent is due, this is how you do taxes, this is how you do actual grocery shopping. Okay, what am I going to have to eat for the next week?

He made progress toward his required courses in his cybersecurity major, but he also become more interested in gaming and developing his skills as a DJ. He realized that if he devoted serious attention to his DJ hobby, it could evolve into a career option and offer the possibility of travel. Another part of Carter's transformation was a growing ability to establish meaningful relationships with co-workers, instructors, and peers.

> If you are somewhat involved in the college you can get more meaningful relationships, and be more successful. Because you don't know if one day you may turn to that one person that you knew in college whether it be a best friend or an acquaintance and be like, 'hey I need help' and then I can go from there.

Thus, Carter experienced a sense of personal transformation and established a network of support at the college. Similarly, Anya also experienced meaningful personal transformation at the community college.

Anya.

Anya described personal transformation as a growing ability to advocate for herself as a learner and an enhanced level of confidence in her academic ability. At the start of her college experience, she felt shy and reluctant to ask for help from advisors, instructors, or tutors. By her second year, however, she had created a network of support and knew whom to contact with any question. When asked to describe her level of engagement in her first semester, Anya responded:

> I wasn't taking help from Learning Commons or anything but now I know that I can get so (much) help from different people. I go there and if I have any queries or any problems I go to this person… If have problems with A and P (Anatomy and Physiology), I have to go to this instructor. If I am (having a) problem with this, I have to go to this person. Now I know and it is helping me so much now, and I'm getting so much help.

In addition to finding supporters, Anya also feels that her first few semesters of college gave her a deeper understanding of the American system of education and employment. Through her SSC, for example, she learned about academic planning, researching careers, creating a resume, and other aspects of American life that she hadn't learned about growing up in India. When asked whether some components of the SSC should be removed, she responded:

I don't remember all of it but I don't think so because everything was helpful to me… I can tell from my perspective, if people who were born here and lived here for years, they know perfect English and everything, it might not be a problem for them. For me it's like I learned so much… I know a lot more than I used to know, so I don't think they should change anything because it is helping foreign people that are from different countries. It's helping a lot.

Thus, the participants in the "medium barrier" group viewed their early-college experience as transformative in a variety of ways. All of them forged networks of support among faculty, staff, and peers that were instrumental in strengthening their engagement as learners. The learning process itself contributed to their personal evolution since it helped them gain confidence and plan for their future. As Carter put it, "you can't be sheltered all your life" and these students were preparing themselves on many levels for adulthood.

Group III: Lower Barriers, Fewer Obstacles

One participant was placed into the "lower level" of pre-college barriers, due to the relative ease of her pre-college educational experience and the high level of family support received. This student, Christine, also experienced comparatively fewer obstacles during her first few college semesters.

Like other participants, Christine created a network of advising and faculty support and established meaningful connections to several of her peers. By her second year, she was on track to complete her program in Communication and New Media. She decided, however, to change her career goal to Biomedical Engineering, which required

restarting her college coursework essentially from the beginning. Christine described her enthusiasm for this new phase of her education and described herself as a lifelong learner.

Pre-college barriers.

Christine.

Like most participants in the study, Christine chose to attend the community college primarily due to its convenient location and comparative low cost. In high school, she enjoyed studying English, participating in the vocational program in Communication and New Media, and competing as an athlete in tennis and field hockey. As she approached high school graduation, she considered applying for a media-related job rather than going to college.

> Before I started college I was thinking, oh, I don't really need to go to college in this major because I can just go right into media working. But I was also thinking, oh if I do go to college I'll just go two years then I'll be done… Now that I studied in college and experienced it, I want to study more.

Despite her strengths in English and media-related technology, she finished high school with some academic deficits. Due to her scores on placement tests, she was enrolled in a pre-college math course. She viewed the developmental coursework as an opportunity for students to gain proficiency in an area they'd previously found challenging.

> I did take a math developmental course and I really appreciated how (the college) has developmental course offerings because if you are struggling in a subject,

there's a course that you can take to prepare for that... I took (math) 020 and then I took 030, now I'm taking 030 (again) and I think next I'm going to take 050 and then slowly, eventually, once I get more comfortable with math, I'll eventually take a hundred level to graduate and I think that's very helpful for students.

Christine also experienced what might be seen as a luxury among community college students. Though she was employed nearly full-time during her first semester, she later only worked a part-time schedule of about 10 to 15 hours per week and could therefore devote herself full-time to her college experience. She joined clubs such as the school newspaper and the International Club, which introduced her to new circles of friends. However, Christine also faced obstacles such as her uncertainty about the goal of completing college and later the challenges of juggling responsibilities for her courses with extra-curricular activities.

Student engagement despite obstacles.

Christine.

Christine noticed many differences between her high-school and college experiences. She felt that students were treated as adults by her college instructors, who made the classes more interesting by sharing their own professional experiences in such fields as web design and filmmaking. She arrived at college with a strong interest in writing and journalism and found that courses in her major, Communication and New Media Studies, inspired new interests in media-related skills.

I was interested also in photography for a while and then that changed to journalism but they are all related and still in the same major. So it's helpful in Communication and New Media Studies, there's many different parts of it. There's the videography, there's the photography, there's the digital foundations, there's even journalism… there's business and web design. There's really a lot.

In order to get more experience in the field of journalism, Christine chose to write for the college newspaper. Participation in clubs connected her with talented students who took on leadership roles at the college. However, juggling her responsibilities for her courses, the clubs, and her part-time job was challenging. Christine found that when mid-term exams were approaching, she needed to cut back on her work for the newspaper.

Because my friend in the newspaper, she was the editor and she was also the same major as me, Communication and New Media. So maybe she was using that as some kind of experience for her major, like I was doing. And also when I was in International Club, my friend… I think she was the president of that club. She was also a leader in that and she (owns) a business already while she's studying.

Christine's most significant academic challenge emerged during her second year, when she decided to change her career goal to the medical field, another area that she found interesting from a young age. As she began to explore this option, Christine found herself back in the position of a first-semester student: exploring her area of interest, learning about the necessary coursework, and expanding her network of support in order to learn about this new path.

I think it influenced me (that) throughout growing up, a lot of my family has said that I'd like to see you do medicine, something medical. And I always was so interested in journalism and media. And now I'm planning on doing (a medical program) next. I think Biomedical Engineering.

Thus, Christine had made significant progress toward her associate degree in the communications field, felt engaged in her coursework, and relied on the support of a network of instructors and advisors. Her new emerging interest in the medical field raised new questions and challenges, ranging from the transferability of her coursework to the best institutions for her to consider for a new degree. At the point when Christine expected to be ending her education, she found herself starting again from the beginning.

Perceptions of advising.

Christine.

Like most other participants, Christine found that the SSC contributed to a welcoming atmosphere at the college. She also found that the facilitators in her classes and many campus events helped to make students feel at home. Christine's program, Communications and New Media, provided ways for students to get to know one another because students generally took several of the same courses.

I think what made it most different from everything else is how you... have such a community... Most of the experiences I had being friends with people at (the college) were from classes... if they're in the same major lots of the students are always in so many similar classes. And I think, just taking advantage of all the

opportunities of the events, the clubs... I joined the newspaper and I got to hear more stories from students and have responses from students.

Like Carter and Adelle, Christine experienced an interruption in her advising experience because her first SSC advisor left the college soon after the start of fall classes. Christine found the disruption challenging because she had established a relationship with the first SSC advisor. She did eventually start meeting with her new SSC advisor, who considered Christine a "less connected" advisee since she participated in advising meetings infrequently.

Christine found the SSC to be a helpful course that introduced her to important college-related information about academic planning, financial literacy, and other topics. She worked with her SSC advisor to choose her classes and also to understand the pathway through her chosen major. She enjoyed meeting with her SSC advisor and felt that the one-to-one meetings provided needed emotional support.

I feel that it makes students more comfortable when they have somebody to talk to that can... give them advice about their academics, in that it... gives us more confidence to have an extra resource.

When her first SSC advisor left the college, however, it took some time for Christine to feel comfortable with the change. By the end of her second year, Christine and her SSC advisor started researching other colleges and universities which offered a program in Biomedical Engineering.

It was yes, it was difficult because I got really got used to her and... she helped me so much with college that I got more comfortable with her... But then when

she left I kind of missed her but at the same time now I'm used to (my new advisor) because I've had her for a couple of years now... I'm comfortable with her... and she helps me so much too.

Like the participants in Groups I and II, Christine experienced all four dimensions of advising: a welcoming environment, help with academic planning, connections with a network of supporters, and a heightened sense of confidence.

Experience of personal transformation.

Christine.

As she progressed through the first few semesters of college, Christine developed meaningful relationships with a wide network of peers, advisors, and faculty members. She also reported that her academic interests expanded as she continued studying about the field of communication. Christine was interested in photography and journalism but originally planned to go directly into the workforce after high school. She never would have imagined a desire to continue to a four-year college.

I think at the beginning, before I started college, I only wanted to join for two years or maybe not even college. And now that I'm in college I want to study again. So I think that college can change somebody's ambitions or somebody's dreams.

As Christine begins to explore her new goal of Biomedical Engineering, or some other career in the medical field, she reenters the phase of academic exploration. She intends to start by turning to the network she has already established.

I was asking (my advisor) because I was interested in another major as well…
and now I think after Communication and New Media I'm going to go into a
different major. And so we were talking about that, and the options where I could
transfer and which major exactly I was interested in.

Thus, like other participants in the study, Christine experienced a sense of
personal transformation that included social integration, academic growth, and plans for
the future. Unlike other participants, however, she faced uncertainty about her academic
path and long-term goals.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of the qualitative study. My analysis of the
range of participants' transition-to-college experiences led to grouping participants
according to high, medium, and lower barriers encountered prior to enrollment in college.
At the highest level of barriers, two participants experienced such severe challenges as
poverty, homelessness, addiction, and lack of family support. Prior to starting college,
each was highly determined to progress toward their clearly defined long-term goals.
They established their identities as students and maintained high engagement during their
early semesters. Though their experience with advising varied considerably, they both
forged effective networks of support and continued to experience the personal
transformation initiated earlier in their lives.

At the medium level of incoming barriers, three participants experienced a series
of obstacles during their early semesters. Their pre-college barriers were less severe, due
mostly to the support they received from family members at times of need. Some of the

challenges they encountered during their transition to college were hospitalization for severe illness, failed courses, financial stress, difficulty balancing school with employment, and periods of low self-confidence.

These participants reported varying levels of support from their advising experience. While two were viewed as "connected" by their SSC advisors, the third was considered "less connected" and found supportive faculty and staff elsewhere at the college. Despite these initial perceptions, all three of them established effective networks of support, experienced personal transformation, and persevered toward completion of a program or transfer to another institution.

At the lowest level of incoming barriers, one participant experienced ongoing support from family members and minor obstacles in her first semesters. While she did find the advising experience helpful, she was considered "less connected" by her SSC advisor, partly due to an interruption in the service due to staff turnover. This student created a network of support and experienced personal transformation. By her second year of study, this participant had decided to change her long-term goals, resulting in uncertainty in her academic path but enthusiasm for her new educational journey.

My findings reveal a relationship between incoming barriers, ongoing obstacles, levels of engagement, and persistence toward a goal. Participants' reflections on their early college experiences confirmed four dimensions of advising that were particularly meaningful: welcoming environment; connections with a wider network of supporters; guidance on academic planning; and emotional support that enhanced their level of confidence. Participants explained that their experiences of these dimensions emerged

not only from their interaction with the advisor but also from relationships with instructors, faculty advisors, work-study supervisors, disability coordinators, peers, and others.

Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

Introduction

This qualitative study was designed to explore the perceptions of community-college students who had experienced advising associated with their first-semester student-success course. The students' SSC was collaboratively facilitated by an instructor and the students' dedicated .advisors. A similar collaborative model has been adopted at many colleges according to published reports, though a dearth of quantitative or qualitative studies have been conducted on the practice.

I interviewed the four female and two male participants three times each and each of the interviews was focused on a particular aspect of the research questions. As was pointed out in the methodology chapter, the six participants were recommended by their advisors, all six had persisted into their second year of studies, and all were academically successful. SSC advisors categorized students into two groups: "connected" students who had attended three advising meetings in the first semester and participated in workshops and events in their second semester; and "less connected" students who had attended fewer than three advising meetings in the first semester and minimal or no workshops or events during the spring semester.

I conducted the interviews using a semi-structured format; I recorded and transcribed them using Trint transcription software. Once corrected and proofread, I uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose, a web-based research analysis platform, which allowed for selective word counts, coding of recurring topics, and identification of themes. I conducted member checks at interviews with participants, and I commented on themes of previous conversations to check the accuracy of my assumptions. I also kept

records of personal reflections, thought processes behind coding decisions, and rationale for the selection of themes.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an advising experience offered within the context of a student-success course.

Research Questions

1. What were community-college students' perceptions of their advising experience provided within the context of their success course?

2. How were students' overall college transition experiences influenced, if at all, by their advising experience?

Unlike the presentation of findings in Chapter Four, I have organized this discussion of findings and conclusions according to the study's research questions. First, I will consider the research question pertaining to the advising experience, followed by the more general research question on the participants' overall college-transition experiences.

I conclude the discussion of findings with an analysis of selected articles from the literature review beginning with a pair of studies describing the characteristics of adult and nontraditional learners. I will discuss three additional pairs of research studies related to three primary elements of students' experience observed in the current study: barriers, advising, and engagement. Each pair includes a seminal or early study on the topic as well as a more recent theory or model. I used the historical arc of previous research as a lens through which to view the results of the current study. Finally, I will offer conclusions on the primary takeaways from the study.

Discussion of Findings: Perceptions of Advising

SSC-based advising model viewed favorably.

Participants in the current study became acquainted with their SSC advisors in the context of the SSC. Their perceptions of the course, therefore, blended with their impressions of first-year advising. Most participants reported that it was helpful to be introduced to an SSC advisor through the required course, since getting to know this advisor did not require much additional time. Since most students were juggling their courses with a nearly full-time work schedule, the practicality of the SSC-based advising model was appreciated.

In cases where SSC advising services were interrupted due to staff turnover or other reasons, students experienced some displacement, but were usually able to establish a connection with a new advisor. Only one participant, who missed half of the class meetings of the SSC due to hospitalization, did not view the advising experience as helpful.

The SSC-based advising model was viewed as effective by students planning a transfer to a four-year college. SSC advisors were perceived as valuable guides through the complicated process of choosing a four-year college and understanding the credit-transfer process. Even as early as the first semester, students were beginning to plan for the financial and academic aspects of their transfer.

Connection to informal advising network.

At all levels of pre-college barriers and regardless of the severity of ongoing obstacles, my analysis of the data and construction of findings revealed that participants viewed their advising experience as a wider, informal network of interactions with a

variety of faculty, staff, and peers. Students were sometimes encouraged to make contact with their faculty advisors or other staff members by the SSC advisor. In other cases, students independently took the initiative to make connections with such significant individuals as their own faculty members, the college's disabilities coordinator, or their work-study supervisors.

Participants with the highest levels of pre-college barriers achieved strong identities as students and were committed to the goal of college completion. Due to severe pre-college barriers, they were determined to achieve academic and career success. They experienced intrinsic motivation for learning in their core classes as well as the general-education curriculum. Each of them successfully forged informal networks of support, which included instructors, faculty advisors, transfer counselors, significant others, and peers.

At the medium level of pre-college barriers, participants faced severe ongoing obstacles. Despite these challenging setbacks, all three persisted toward graduation. They connected with an informal network of support including faculty advisors, work-study supervisors, instructors, disability coordinators, and peers. In some cases, participants, at first, struggled to establish clear goals, especially when accurate information on their choice of major was not readily accessible.

At the lowest level of pre-college barriers, the ongoing obstacles were less severe. The participant experienced support from a variety of sources, including student clubs, faculty members, and peers. Since Christine participated in a small academic program, she benefitted from the attention of committed faculty advisors and a cohort of peers taking many of the same courses.

Key dimensions of advising.

Participants spoke of four meaningful dimensions of advising through their advising experience and other aspects of college life: a welcoming environment; connections with a wider network of supporters; guidance on academic planning; and emotional support that enhanced their level of confidence. These dimensions of advising exerted facilitative influences on students' experience of engagement in their studies, and provided a counterbalance to the inevitable obstacles experienced by students during their early semesters.

The dimensions of advising were discussed by all participants, including those who were initially considered "less connected" by their advisors. The less connected students, who had experienced interruptions in advising services due to staff turnover or other reasons, generally reported that they experienced all four of these dimensions, though some were facilitated more by faculty advisors, course instructors, work-study supervisors, or others.

A welcoming environment was highly valued by students in the classroom and in all interactions with staff and faculty. SSC advisors welcomed students by engaging them in informal conversations, inviting students to events, and meeting with them individually. Participants also described a welcoming environment in their classrooms and at other campus-wide events such as a fall barbecue and events sponsored by student clubs.

SSC advising helped participants to create informal networks of support among faculty, staff, and peers. Informal networks were shown to be effective whether the students' level of incoming barriers was high, medium, or low. The SSC advisors

facilitated this process by recommending that students visit their faculty advisors, encouraging them to regularly communicate with their instructors, providing information about clubs and events on campus, introducing them to transfer counselors, and other means. Participants who were not as fully connected with the SSC advising were able to establish a variety of connections at the college with other helpful individuals.

Academic planning, or advice on course selection within the chosen major, was viewed as a meaningful dimension of SSC advising by nearly all participants. Especially at times of uncertainty about long-term goals, students relied on SSC advisors to explore their academic and career options. They also sought SSC advisors' help to plan a pathway through their programs, select courses, and access information about financial aid, campus housing, the transfer process, and other matters. As mentioned previously, such guidance on academic planning was not provided solely by the SSC advisor. In fact, some participants found that their faculty advisors were the most knowledgeable sources of information about pathways through participants' chosen programs of study.

Finally, students described enhanced levels of self-confidence due to emotional support from SSC advisors, faculty, and other significant individuals. As students navigated inevitable obstacles, such as illness, academic failure, or financial stress, they turned to SSC advisors, faculty advisors, work-study supervisors and others for validation and encouragement. Participants drew strength from interaction with faculty and staff who believed in their potential.

Discussion of Findings: Transition-to-College Experience

  Personal transformation.

As discussed in Chapter Four, participants described experiences of personal transformation ranging from expanded areas of academic interest to an enhanced sense of personal agency. Participants at all levels of incoming barriers described such changes and some pointed out that their courses and the college setting provided a unique environment that allowed such changes to occur.

Participants in Group I, who faced such barriers as poverty, addiction, and separation from family members, viewed academic engagement as a critical factor contributing to their overall success in their programs and eventual professional lives. Through previous struggles, they were determined to complete their college degrees. Interaction with supportive faculty, staff, and peers helped them to grow intellectually and personally and experience personal transformation.

The three members of Group II, who experienced a medium level of incoming barriers, drew upon their networks of support, fully experienced personal transformation, and remained engaged and persistent. They described personal transformations that resulted in greater levels of self-confidence, leadership, and social connection. Those who planned to transfer to four-year colleges felt more certain about their long-term goals and more capable of making decisions that would lead toward career satisfaction.

At the lowest level of incoming barriers, the participant gained an enhanced sense of identity as a student. She became interested in a wider range of topics associated with her major and realized that she held aspirations for continued study in a completely different academic discipline. She noted that her college experience had changed her level of ambition and her dreams for the future.

Definitions clarified: barriers and obstacles.

The study's findings offered a more precise distinction between the root causes of students' educational challenges and the subsequent obstacles experienced along their educational path. While the term "barrier" is used in the literature to refer to both of these levels of challenge, the current study's findings differentiate between barriers and obstacles.

The distinction is important because root causes such as poverty, physical or mental illness, lack of family support, or lack of academic preparation are conditions that could potentially exert long-term influences on students. These are conditions that students did not choose and may have had little power to change, at least in the short term. The obstacles they faced during their transition-to-college experience, however, were generally more resolvable and surmountable. SSC advisors could use this distinction to their advantage by assisting students to develop practical solutions to their obstacles while maintaining awareness of the underlying barriers exerting influence in the students' lives.

Conclusion.

The study's first three findings were related to the first research question regarding student perceptions of the advising experience. Nearly all participants in the study reported that they benefitted from their first-year advising experience and their SSC. The course offered a welcoming environment to students and provided a convenient way for them to get acquainted with the SSC advisors. Participants' reflection on their advising experiences revealed four meaningful dimensions of advising: welcoming environment; connections with a wider network of supporters; guidance on academic planning; and emotional support that enhanced their level of confidence.

Two findings were related to the second research question regarding participants' overall transition-to-college experiences. Based upon an analysis of relationships among the themes in the study, the findings suggest that participants experienced personal transformation. Informal advising relationships with many members of the college served as facilitative elements that helped students overcome a series of obstacles. The study also clarified the distinction between pre-college barriers and ongoing obstacles.

As discussed previously, the findings highlight students' experiences of barriers, level of connection to advising, establishment of identity as a student, and experience of personal transformation. For example, students with the most severe pre-college barriers demonstrated the highest level of determination to succeed as students. Several participants described the process of establishing an identity as a student for the first time in their lives. Even those participants who were perceived as "less connected" by their SSC advisors were successful at forging informal networks of support. Students did not necessarily perceive a particular SSC advisor or faculty advisor as their "primary" source of support at the college. Instead, they drew encouragement and guidance from a wider circle of faculty, staff, peers, and others.

Analysis of Related Literature

Introduction.

The study's literature review summarized previous research by pairing studies, one seminal and one more recent, on four primary themes of the study. I selected the first pair of studies to provide a clearer understanding of the "student profile" or the general characteristics of the nontraditional students who participated in the study. I chose the

remaining three pairs of studies to offer insight into three fundamental elements of students' experience explored through the study: barriers, engagement, and advising.

I analyzed each pair of studies to determine which theories or models, if any, best aligned with the findings of the current study. Analysis of the literature helped me clarify the key takeaways from the study.

Nontraditional or post-traditional participants.

As discussed in the literature review, Knowles' (1996) theory of andragogy offers insight into teaching methods designed to meet the developmental needs of adult learners. The term "adult learner" typically refers to persons aged 25 and older, a range that applies to only one study participant, Adam. The assumptions about adult learners offered by Knowles aligned with the experience of participants in the current study, despite their younger age. For example, participants described their higher level of engagement in college studies compared to high school because they were allowed more freedom for self-direction. They preferred problem-focused learning experiences that involved action-oriented learning tasks. Most also preferred to focus on career-related learning, which aligns with Knowles' (1996) assertion that learning should be "oriented toward the developmental tasks of… social roles" (p. 55). Since participants' upcoming developmental task was entry into professional-level employment, they used their learning experiences to prepare for that milestone.

Participants stressed the importance of having a respectful, welcoming learning environment, which Knowles (1996) viewed as critical for successful adult teaching. "The psychological climate should be one what [*sic*] causes adults to feel accepted,

respected, and supported; in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers" (p. 57). Participants in the current study explained that they were able to learn more effectively when they felt the instructor knew them as individuals, supported them in times of need, and created a respectful atmosphere.

Soares' (2013) "Manifesto for college leaders" offers insights into the student profile of study participants. Nearly all participants in the study could be considered nontraditional undergraduates since they attended college part-time, worked full time, were financially independent from their parents, or had taken at least one gap year after high school. Like the post-traditional students described by Soares, the study participants were concerned about the cost of education, focused on developing job-related skills, and held a preference for learning that blended occupational experience with academic training.

Only one participant, Adam, fully met Soares' definition of the post-traditional learner, since he was over age 25, employed full-time, was the parent of a young child, and was working toward a job-related credential. Even Soares (2013) admitted, however, that the boundaries between the definitions of nontraditional and post-traditional learners were shifting.

> As a final note to demonstrate that post-traditional learners are the new normal, the line between undergraduate adult students (25 and older) and traditional-age students (26 and younger) gets increasingly blurred as more and more college students of all ages seek alternative ways of learning—part-time, evenings, weekends, off-campus, or online. (p.7)

Thus, the study participants could all be considered nontraditional students and more than half could be considered post-traditional learners, depending on how strictly the lines were drawn. In any event, the participants were self-directed students who placed great emphasis on the practical application of education. Through necessity, they learned to be financially independent and they functioned best as learners when their needs for respect and flexibility were met.

Academic-related barriers.

As discussed in the literature review, various models have been proposed to understand the barriers facing adult learners. Since most students who participated in the current study were considered nontraditional students due to their full-time work status, financial independence from family, or age over 25, they shared many characteristics of adult learners in research by Ekstrom (1972) and Deggs (2011).

Unlike previous research, my study made a distinction between pre-college barriers and ongoing obstacles to college persistence. The metaphor of climate versus weather could be used to clarify the difference between barriers and obstacles. Barriers are analogous to the ongoing climate of the student's lived experience while obstacles appeared and dissipated, more like changes in weather patterns. My distinction between these terms creates a more authentic representation of the students' experience in which "barriers" imply an impenetrable structure that prevents forward progress, while "obstacles" are commonly viewed as challenges that can be addressed and possibly surmounted. In the current study, pre-existing barriers are understood as the "root causes" of students' academic challenges and fall into such themes as poverty, chronic

mental or physical illness, lack of family support, or lack of adequate academic preparation.

When examined in light of the pair of studies from the literature, it became clear that pre-existing barriers mostly fell into the "situational" category proposed by Ekstrom (1972). For example, chronic mental or physical illness, lack of family support, poverty, and lack of adequate academic preparation could all be considered situational factors. Severe dispositional factors such as lack of self-worth or lack of motivation as a learner were not observed in the current study since only students who had successfully persisted into their second year of college were included as participants.

The obstacles to engagement, identified in the current study, include challenges faced along students' pathways through their programs. These factors included financial stress, need to balance work and college, episodes of illness, confusion over long-term goals, failure in individual classes, lack of interest in general-education courses, and need for developmental classes. Some of these factors fell into Ekstrom's (1972) situational category while the majority aligned with Deggs' (2011) academic-related barrier classification.

The distinctions are useful for understanding the findings of the current study because the situational barriers experienced by students prior to enrollment were aspects of their lives over which they had little control. The students had not chosen to be raised in poverty, experience addiction, suffer from chronic illness, or endure an absence of family support.

The obstacles they faced during their early semesters, however, were mostly related to their academic experience. Thus, these were aspects of experience over which students had influence, such as a need for developmental coursework, tutoring, transfer guidance, or technology assistance. For example, if they were failing an anatomy course, they could meet with a faculty advisor, withdraw from the class, and reenroll in the subsequent semester. If they felt uncertain about their career goals, they could schedule a meeting with a career counselor, seek opportunities for job shadowing, or arrange an internship. Obstacles, for the most part, could be assessed and overcome with the proper set of actions, as long as students were connected to a network of support.

Perception of engagement aligned with seminal research.

The literature review presented seminal theories of integration, involvement, and engagement, which lay the groundwork for subsequent student-retention research. The current study explores the theme of engagement, which is supported primarily by students' clear long-term goals, intrinsic interest in learning, positive learning experiences, and connection to a network of support.

In the seminal studies of student engagement by George Kuh (2007), the definition of student engagement focuses on the degree to which students devote time and effort to their studies and their college-related activities such as college clubs and meaningful interaction with faculty and peers. In Kuh's perception, student engagement occurs primarily when institutions provide facilitative educational practices, such as experiences that establish communities of learners, first-year seminars, or service-learning programs.

Zepke (2015) argues for a widening of the definition of student engagement. Rather than viewing it primarily as an experience of active learning in the classroom that could someday translate into workplace success, he suggests a more nuanced understanding. He cites research by scholars who focus on sociocultural, ecological, and holistic aspects of student engagement that are associated with civic involvement, political activism, or enhanced levels of self-esteem.

As Zepke (2015) suggests, participants' experience of engagement influences not only their progression through a program of study, but also their perception of themselves in the world at large. As participants' personal transformation occurs, they generally become more self-directed, assertive, and capable of self-advocacy. A byproduct of this personal evolution is a heightened sense of creativity or responsibility to contribute toward the needs of others.

My findings supported a view of student engagement aligned more closely with seminal research by Kuh and colleagues (2007) rather than that of Zepke (2015). Participants described their active participation in learning, strengthened by active-learning pedagogies used in the classroom. They viewed engagement as the required first step that could lead toward their long-term goals of enhanced expertise in an area of concentration. For all participants, long-term goals were tied to earning meaningful credentials leading to financial benefits.

Personal transformation.

The emergence of personal transformative experiences was an unexpected finding. The fact that it was described universally by all participants was especially striking. Some participants were even asked, point-blank, if they had not attended

college, but had gone to work instead, would they have experienced the same sense of personal transformation? They did not believe so. They felt there was something uniquely compelling about the experience of higher education that inspired the change. It occurred across multiple levels: cognitive, intellectual, emotional, social, and physical.

The students' personal transformation during their transition-to-college was especially meaningful because many "at risk" students who attend community colleges may not have previously experienced high levels of engagement in education. The fact that even students with severe incoming barriers could experience personal transformation and emerge with strong levels of commitment to learning suggests that community colleges can, in fact, exert a democratizing effect in society.

Findings support revision to advising models.

Crookston's (1972) seminal research describes advising not only as a set of prescriptive interactions leading to course selection, but a more compelling relationship designed to enhance students' cognitive, personal, and social development. In his article "A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching" Crookston (1972) states that advising is "concerned not only with a personal and vocational decision but also with facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills" (p. 12).

Crookston's insight aligns with my findings because I observed a profound transformation in the lived experience of each participant. As noted above, the participants described this change as a sense of deeper engagement in intellectual activity, a greater sense of self-direction and self-confidence, or strengthened ability in

areas of decision-making and self-advocacy. Participants did not attribute this change solely to interaction with one advisor, however, but described it more generally as a byproduct of their coursework and interactions with a network of supportive (or unsupportive) individuals.

Lowenstein's (2005) article, "If Advising is Teaching, What do Advisors Teach?" offers the observation that the advisor may be the only person at the institution who interacts with a particular student over the course of his or her entire tenure at the college. Thus, the advisor has a unique opportunity to facilitate students' understanding of how all the pieces of the curriculum fit together and how the student has personally experienced cognitive, social, and personal growth during college.

The current study's findings support Lowenstein's (2005) observations. They reveal, however, that students' personal transformations are tied to a complex set of interactions with scores of individuals. Rather than viewing the one-to-one advising relationship in a vacuum, the findings suggest that one of the primary roles of advising is facilitating connections to a network of supporters. My study's results point to a renewed emphasis by advisors on helping students establish an informal advising network at the college and becoming more aware of the personal transformation they are going through.

Conclusion.

I analyzed pairs of studies from the literature review to compare my findings to the results of seminal and more recent literature on four primary topics. The analysis provides clarity on a number of elements. The participants describe their learning experiences in terms very similar to those used by Knowles (1996) in his analysis of the

needs of adult learners. Participants' demographic characteristics also place them roughly into the nontraditional and post-traditional categories, as defined by Soares (2013).

While pre-enrollment barriers align mainly with Ekstom's (1972) situational barriers, participants' ongoing obstacles fall primarily into Deggs' (2011) "academic-related barrier" category. These observations provide clarification on the distinction between barriers and obstacles. Participants' perceptions of engagement parallel the seminal studies of Kuh (2007), though Zepke's (2015) work provides insight into their experience of personal transformation.

Finally, I analyzed the findings in light of seminal and more recent models of advising by Crookston (1972) and Lowenstein (2005). In this case, the findings point toward a revision to existing models, since participants describe a more collaborative experience of advising within a wider informal network of support.

Application of Findings to Advising Models

This discussion of the primary takeaways from my study included an analysis of the meaningful dimensions of advising, networks of support, personal transformation, and applications to advising models. Based on my findings, the participants' advising experiences provided facilitative supports that helped them to maintain a high level of engagement in their studies.

The process of reviewing students' levels of barriers, patterns of engagement, and interactions with advisors offers the opportunity to observe community college students' wide diversity of experience. It is surprising, for example, that the group of students with

the highest levels of incoming barriers made the most direct progress toward their clearly defined goals.

Conclusions related to participants' transition-to-college experience focus primarily on the process of undergoing personal transformation. Some participants started college after fundamental personal change had already occurred. For others, college enrollment coincided with an early stage of transformation setting the stage for continued personal evolution.

Proposed revision to advising models.

My findings also suggest a new way of informing existing advising paradigms. Participants described the influence of multiple forms of advising all happening simultaneously. They reported meaningful conversations with faculty advisors, instructors, disability coordinators, and work-study supervisors. At various points in their early semesters, they relied more on the faculty advisor, an SSC advisor, or a favorite faculty member. They valued advisors because of their ability to facilitate network-building with others.

Most of the influential models of advising have viewed the advising relationship independently from other interactions and have focused primarily on the philosophy and methods used by the advisor. The models, such as prescriptive, developmental, intrusive, proactive, learning-centered, and validating, all described the advising experience exclusive of other institutional interactions. My findings suggest that instead of viewing the advising relationship in a vacuum, we should widen the lens. By becoming more aware of the students' network of formal and informal advising experiences, the advisor

is more effective at supporting the students' nascent experience of personal transformation.

My findings related to students' networks of formal and informal advising support and the common experience of personal transformation suggest a new paradigm for the advisor-advisee relationship. My findings indicate that it is wise for advisors to refrain from making assumptions about the students' lived experience at the college. Each student is likely interacting with a host of influential individuals, including faculty, staff, and peers. A process of personal transformation is likely occurring, whether or not the student is consciously aware of it. The advisor can help the student to become more aware of these developing themes in their own lives. The following discussion provides more detailed suggestions on incorporating the study's findings into existing models of advising.

Prescriptive.

Prescriptive advising refers to the more "directive" process of informing students about college policies and requirements. It can include recommendations on course selection, program requirements, withdrawal procedures, and other matters. For students who intend to transfer to a four-year college, it also involves guidance on all the elements of the transfer process, such as researching colleges and their academic offerings, investigating transfer-partner agreements, helping with the application process, and other steps.

Knowledge about students' formal and informal networks of support is helpful for an advisor offering prescriptive guidance. For example, the student may already have

developed an informal advising relationship with a faculty member who could offer firsthand knowledge about suitable programs at four-year colleges. Thus, communication with members of the students' informal network could provide valuable answers to advisees' key questions.

Developmental.

As discussed in the literature review, developmental advising refers to a more nuanced, exploratory form of advising interaction. When using a developmental approach, advisors use active listening skills and open-ended questions to help the student to make connections among the disparate elements of their learning experiences, such as how their general-education courses inform their core coursework. The students' experiences of personal, intellectual, and social growth are explored through developmental advising.

Attention to students' informal advising networks enhances the effectiveness of developmental advising. For example, by exploring this theme, advisors might learn that a student's family members do not fully support their college aspirations but that a soccer coach or faculty member is viewed as a supportive ally. The advisor helps the student to reduce the impact of non-supportive individuals while enhancing the positive relationships within the students' informal network.

Helping students become aware of their own experiences of personal transformation also enhances the practice of developmental advising. Pointing out students' changing attitudes toward education or their own perceptions of themselves as learners inspires higher levels of confidence in their future success as college students.

Such conversations help students to choose future coursework or plan for their career path.

Proactive.

Proactive (formerly known as intrusive) advising is a process of making the advising experience inescapable for students. Offering advising as a component of a first-semester SSC is one way of delivering proactive advising. Other methods include checking in with advisees at critical points in the semester, such as early alert reporting periods, mid-semester grading periods, and at the close of the semester.

Reaching out to other members of the students' informal network of support is another way for advisors to offer proactive services. For example, if the student interacts with a residence-life counselor, he or she might offer insights into the students' level of motivation or commitment. Communication with such knowledgeable staff members allows the advisor to better plan the timing and content of interactions with the advisee.

Advising as teaching.

The teaching aspect of advising has been explored through many studies. As pointed out in the literature, the advisor may be the only individual who interacts with students throughout their entire course of study at the college. The advisors are therefore good candidates for helping students make sense of all the disparate elements of their academic experience, including general-education coursework. Advisors might also teach other topics and skills, such as time-management, self-advocacy, tolerance, or goal-setting.

Findings from my study suggest that creating informal networks of support can arguably be one of the most important lessons for an advisor to teach. Since the process of connecting students to an advising network cannot be taught all at once, it must be done in steps. For example, steps might include how to write a professional email to a faculty advisor and how to prepare questions for a session with such an advisor. Once a student has established good working relationships with faculty, an advisor might recommend reaching out to other sources of information and support, such as disability services coordinators, transfer counselors, or career-services professionals.

Sense of belonging.

Student's sense of belonging at a college is also influenced by their informal network of supporters (or lack thereof.) Helping students become aware of this aspect of their experience is beneficial. For example, an advisor can help a student to plan ways to become more connected on campus, or how to respond to individuals who make them feel unaccepted.

Conversations with students about their informal network of support leads to valuable opportunities for students, such as how to become involved in internships, clubs, or volunteer opportunities. Advisors should be alert for any signs of students' experience of marginalization and help students make sense of experiences of rejection. Related lessons could include how to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect regardless of another person's words or deeds.

Validation.

Advisors not only provide validation for students, but help students gain affirmative experiences from other individuals within their informal advising network. The first step in this process is encouraging students to notice whether they feel validated in their classrooms and other campus environments. If they are not being treated with respect, students can be coached on appropriate ways to handle such situations, including reporting inappropriate conduct to academic deans.

Advisors can expand students' sense of validation by encouraging them to seek work-study opportunities, plan for an internship experience, or volunteer for non-profit organizations. Such career-related experiences expand students' networks of support while providing the opportunity to apply their knowledge in practical ways.

Conclusion

This chapter offered a summary of my study's primary takeaways, organized according to the two research questions. Three findings were related to the first research question. Participants viewed their SSC-based advising experience as beneficial. They described an informal network of support as a critical contributor toward their experience of engagement. They identified four meaningful dimensions of the experience: welcoming environment, connections with a network of support, academic-planning guidance, and enhanced level of confidence.

Two findings were related to the second research question regarding participants' overall transition-to-college experiences. The findings suggest that participants experienced personal transformation, described as an expansion of academic interests,

greater sense of confidence, or enhanced sense of personal agency. The study also clarified the distinction between pre-college barriers and ongoing obstacles.

My findings indicated that the existing models of advising can be revised through an emphasis on students' informal advising networks. Such influential models as prescriptive, developmental, proactive, and validating advising can be updated by bringing attention to two specific areas of student experience: informal advising networks and personal transformation. Such themes hold the power to enhance students' experience of a range of advising models commonly offered by institutions of higher education.

Chapter Six: Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

Introduction

The findings of this qualitative study suggest implications for higher-education policy and future research. The concern over completion rates, especially for community-college students, has only increased within the past few years. As was discussed in earlier chapters, at one group of mid-sized New England community colleges, only 6% of the 2012 cohort of students graduated within two years or "normal time," according to the IPEDS Data Feedback Report (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). At the three-year mark, or "150% of normal time," the graduation rate was 17%, according to IPEDS data. Even the "200% of normal time" or four-year graduation rate, was only 24%. Thus, about 76% of students at these community colleges had still not completed what is commonly known as a "two-year degree" after four years of enrollment at the institutions. High numbers of students leave the institutions without completing a degree or meaningful credential.

Community colleges are considered to have a "democratizing role" in American society, due to their comparatively low cost and "open-door" admissions policies. The colleges enroll higher percentages of first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color than four-year institutions of higher education (CCRC, 2019).

College credentials are increasingly becoming requirements in the workplace, due partly to globalization of the economy (Lumina Foundation, 2019). In the post-great recession economy, a higher percentage of jobs require educational credentials. "Progress erasing the jobs deficit was slow for some time, but the economy has long

since recovered the 8.7 million jobs lost between the start of the recession in December 2007 and early 2010 and continued to add jobs since" (Chart Book, 2019, para. 8). Of the lost millions of jobs, however, about four out of five were those requiring only a high-school diploma and economic analysts do not expect these jobs to return (Lumina Foundation, 2019).

As a result of these trends, community colleges have initiated a wide range of efforts to enhance student success and increase retention and graduation rates. As demonstrated by this qualitative research study, offering advising in the context of the SSC holds promise for providing students with early connections to a dedicated advisor, a practice that can lead to higher levels of confidence and mitigate the effects of the inevitable obstacles students face in their first year.

This chapter sets out examples of practices and recommendations for policy. My recommendations are organized according to the four dimensions of advising. I begin with policy implications related to the general theme of "advising offered in the context of the SSC," since this is the overarching theme of the dissertation. Next, I discuss the four meaningful dimensions of advising including a welcoming environment; connections with a wider network of supporters; guidance on academic planning; and emotional support that enhances a student's self-confidence. A variety of policies related to the four dimensions of advising have been implemented at community colleges with positive effects on retention and graduation rates. Finally, I will discuss the values underlying the policy proposals and suggestions for future research.

Policy Implications: Advising Offered through SSC

Current study.

As demonstrated by this qualitative study, the SSC-based advising model offered practical solutions to a difficult dilemma. Since most participants were nontraditional students who were juggling academic coursework with the demands of full-time employment, their free time was limited. The SSC-based model made advising accessible and inescapable for students since it was offered through a required one-credit course. Thus, advising associated with a student success course is one way for institutions to ensure that its new incoming students receive high-quality advising services in their first year.

The SSC-based advising model could also be tailored to the needs of different institutions. In the current study, the SSC advisors attended all or most of the class sessions of the SSC and facilitated some classroom activities. Even on a more limited scale, however, integration of SSC advising facilitators or "advising curriculum" in first-semester courses has been shown to result in positive outcomes.

Example of policy application.

One organization that has advocated for increased levels of collaboration among faculty and staff within student-success courses at community college is Achieving the Dream. AtD has been embraced by more than 200 two-year institutions of higher education in 34 states (McClenney, 2013). One effort spearheaded at several AtD colleges is the integration of advising into first-year instruction, especially for students with developmental needs.

At Tacoma Community College in Washington, for example, advising-related assignments were incorporated into the first-semester SSC. Students were asked to

develop an academic plan based on their program's requirements (Heg & Watrus, 2017). At Northwest Indian College in Bellingham, Washington, essays for scholarship or financial aid applications were incorporated as assignments into developmental English classes. "While these efforts covered limited numbers of students, there is potential in classroom-based advising for a much broader student reach" (Heg & Watrus, 2017, p. 5).

Recommendation for policy and practice.

I recommend integration of advising services and curriculum into SSCs and other first-semester courses. When feasible, members of the advising staff could serve as facilitators of classroom activities, thereby establishing an early connection with students. When staffing levels make this option impractical, advising curriculum such as program-specific academic planning or reflection on students' choice of major could be incorporated into the SSC coursework. As pointed out in the example from two AtD colleges, these materials can seamlessly be incorporated into SSCs as well as developmental English courses.

Policy Implications: Welcoming Environment

Current study.

Participants in the current study described the importance of a welcoming environment in their classes, at advising centers, and on the campus at large. Virtually all of them said that a friendly, supportive atmosphere supported engaged learning and served as a prerequisite for an effective relationship with an instructor or advisor.

They related specific examples of experiences that contributed to a welcoming atmosphere on campus such as the free, fall barbecue offered by the residence life staff. Some described instructors' efforts on the first day of class to learn students' preferred

names or devote time to individual student introductions. They mentioned SSC advisors' welcoming attitude in orientation sessions where individualized support was provided for first-semester course selection.

Example of policy application.

Several community colleges have found innovative ways to extend a warm welcome to new students. For example, Queensborough Community College in Queens, New York, organizes its onboarding experience through its Queensborough Academies, focused on students' area of concentration. New students are assigned to one of the five options: business; health-related sciences; liberal arts (including education and criminal justice); science, technology, engineering and math (STEM); and visual and performing arts (VAPA).

Each of the academies introduces students to faculty and "freshman coordinators" or advisors who provide enhanced orientation activities. An "assessment protocol" demonstrated improvements in retention and graduation rates at the college. "…Students are enrolled into at least two courses identified as providing high-impact practices (HIPs). These experiences include service learning, e-portfolio use, writing-intensive components, learning communities, and first-year experiences" (Corradetti et al., 2013, para. 2).

Recommendations for policy and practice.

It may not be feasible for every community college to reorganize its academic departments into fully staffed academies featuring ongoing orientation events led by "freshman coordinators." However, most institutions could find ways to incorporate the

spirit of the Queensborough Academies into their daily operations. For example, faculty development sessions on campus could stress the importance of establishing and maintaining a respectful and friendly environment in the classroom. Staff and faculty could be strongly encouraged to attend and support student-sponsored events.

Greater collaboration could be designed into the support programs that already exist on campuses. For example, advisors could use work hours to periodically assist in the tutoring center, contribute toward residence-life programming, or attend academic classes. Faculty could be invited to visit individualized orientation sessions for prospective students in their academic programs. Cross pollination of academic and student-affairs functions would contribute toward a welcoming environment and supportive community on campuses.

Policy Implications: Networks of Support

Current study.

Study participants emphasized the importance of being connected to a network of support at the college. Each student described an incremental experience of establishing ties to a network of significant people. For some, the process started with a work-study position, while others said it was initiated through the efforts of their faculty advisors. Eventually, students' networks included staff advisors, disability services coordinators, transfer counselors, or advisors from other campus programs.

Several participants mentioned that their own academic programs were instrumental in connecting them to faculty and peers. Within their academic programs, they studied with a core team of full- and part-time faculty and found themselves in the

same classes as several of their peers, especially when courses were designated as co-requisites.

Example of policy application.

Research studies have demonstrated that academic programs at community colleges have their own cultures and those that develop student-centered practices can successfully impact levels of student success. The Paralegal Program at Fairview Community College (FCC) in an urban center in the Northeastern United States, for example, was known for its high level of student support, including such offerings as mentoring, internships, job placement help, and faculty advising. "One professor explained… 'Our retention rate is very high because we're a program and we work closely with [students]. . . . We do all our own academic advising. Without that, they're . . . adrift'" (Nitecki, 2011, p. 108).

Recommendation for policy and practice.

Academic programs that have developed student-centered programming and achieve high retention rates are models for emulation within an institution and should be encouraged to share their best practices on service learning, mentoring, internships, writing-intensive courses and other efforts.

Bridging the divide between faculty and staff is another goal that benefits students. If staff advisors were assigned to a particular set of academic departments, enhanced levels of collaboration would be possible. Informal networks are created when faculty and staff attend one another's meetings or collaborate on institutional committees.

to communicate more fully to students about academic programs, courses, and other opportunities such as internships.

Policy Implications: Academic Planning

Current study.

Students highly value their SSC advisor's frequent attention to their academic plans and career goals. Students appreciated SSC advisors' efforts to help with course selection and provide information about transfer opportunities available at different colleges or universities. Thus, collaboration among SSC advisors, faculty, career counselors, and transfer counselors is a practice that supports effective academic planning support for students.

Another feature that assists students in academic planning is the use of "guided pathways" or clearly outlined course sequences through programs of study. Students found such pathways helpful, though some were viewed as more straightforward than others. For example, students expressed confusion about course selection when they were planning to eventually transfer to a four-year college and were attempting to simultaneously meet the program requirements for the associate degree and their eventual bachelor's degree.

Example of policy application.

According to Jenkins and Cho (2013), community colleges are following the standard set by four-year institutions in creating clear roadmaps for selecting courses in a program of study. These "guided pathways" clearly outline the learning outcomes

leading to clear goals. Colleges that successfully monitor students' progress through the major requirements achieve better results.

While rigorous research on the effectiveness of guided pathways in higher education is just beginning, the results are encouraging. For example, in preliminary findings from a random-assignment study of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), which requires students to attend college full-time in a block scheduled course of study and which provides a rich array of supports and incentives for up to three years, MDRC found extraordinarily strong effects on student retention and credit accumulation (p. 7).

Recommendation for policy and practice.

While "guided pathways" have helped students to understand program requirements, colleges could do more to simplify the process of selecting courses. For example, each academic program generally includes general-education requirements drawn from certain categories, such as social science, the humanities, or the arts. Once students have solidified their plans for transfer to a four-year institution, however, they sometimes learn that the general-education courses they have completed at a community college do not meet the requirements for their program at the four-year college.

Expanding the availability of "transfer partner agreements" would help to solve this problem. These agreements offer students a transparent way to see, right from the start of their associate degree, that every one of their courses completed with a grade of "C" or higher will transfer to their chosen baccalaureate program.

Policy Implications: Enhanced Confidence

Current study.

The study's findings confirm the significant role that faculty and staff play in students' self-confidence. Participants spoke of the impact of faculty on many aspects of their college-transition experiences, including their level of interest in their studies, commitment to studying, confidence in their abilities, ambition to continue toward a bachelor's degree, and other areas. Thus, increased levels of interaction with faculty and staff members provides the emotional support that students need.

Example of policy application.

Oakton Community College in one of Chicago's suburbs initiated unique efforts to improve their individual outreach to students and improve retention rates. The college's president, Joianne Smith, called on faculty and staff to increase one-to-one interaction with students. Faculty on the campus responded with the Persistence Project, which has resulted in increased retention rates.

In at least one of their courses, faculty in the humanities and philosophy departments agreed to schedule 15-minute, one-to-one conferences with each student in at least one of their courses. The meetings were designed as an opportunity for faculty to engage with students on a more personal level and hear about the challenges they face outside of the classroom. This personal interaction gave students greater confidence later in the semester to reach out to instructors at times of need. "In one year, the overall fall-to-fall persistence rate increased from 45 percent to 48 percent. Last year the rate increased to 50 percent. But the persistence rate for approximately 1,200 students who were directly affected by the project was significantly higher – 53 percent last year (Smith, 2018, para. 6).

Recommendation for policy and practice.

Meaningful one-to-one staff and faculty experiences translate into enhanced persistence rates for students. Increasing the opportunities for such interactions results in higher persistence rates for students attending community colleges. As demonstrated by the current study, students benefit from having at least one staff or faculty member who truly knows them as an individual.

Peer mentoring is an effective means of providing academic and emotional support within academic programs. The practice has long been used in student-success programs such as the federally funded TRIO Student Support Services program. Second-year students who have received mentoring training serve as empathetic active listeners for new students. They share their own personal experience on such topics as time-management, choice of major, balancing work and college, using college resources, and others. By providing an extra form of one-to-one support, colleges help new students to develop greater connections to resources, resulting in higher levels of confidence.

Conclusion

I have discussed implications for advising practice and policy for the SSC-based model of advising where I stress the themes of cross-divisional interaction by faculty and advising staff. In examples from the literature, it becomes clear that advising-related "curriculum" can be effectively incorporated into academic courses and informal networks can be established between faculty and staff. As a result, faculty and SSC advisors become more adept at helping students to overcome obstacles, forge networks of

support, and undergo personal transformations that prepare them for progress toward their goals.

I discussed each of the four dimensions of advising: a welcoming environment; connections with a wider network of supporters; guidance on academic planning; and emotional support that enhances self-confidence. For each of these aspects of advising, I matched results from the current study with examples of policy applications in the literature and made recommendations for future practice. The analysis demonstrated that students' informal networks of support by faculty, staff, and administrators supported each of the four dimensions of advising.

Values Underlying Policy Proposals

The underlying values supported by the proposed policies are efficiency and equity, since the policies would lead to higher rates of retention and graduation. Improved graduation rates for college students represent a broad form of efficiency for society and a specific value of individual efficiency for students. As completion rates increase, students progress effectively through their academic programs without waste of money or time. On a societal level, as students complete programs more quickly, the cost to taxpayers for student grants and loans are reduced. As more students graduate in their chosen fields, local economies benefit from the influx of young, trained workers. Other compensatory costs for underemployed workers, such as social services for low-income residents, are reduced as higher numbers of students graduate and attain financial independence.

The proposed policies support the value of equity because community colleges enroll higher percentages of students of color, first-generation college students, persons of lower socio-economic status (SES), and disability status than four-year institutions of higher education. When a community college provides additional services to this population, especially during their first semesters as college students, it levels the playing field and gives their students equal access to college degrees and other meaningful credentials as their peers at other colleges or universities.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the current study provides insights into students' perceptions of their advising experiences, additional research is needed to test the findings and gather critical data to guide future improvements on student retention.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, a set of limitations resulted in the findings not being generalizable to a wider student population, such as,

- The study included a small pool of six participants.

- While the participants' demographic characteristics matched well with the institution on factors of age, developmental course enrollment, income level, and major, it did not match well on factors of gender and status as English language learners.

- Advisors who offered the SSC-based advising model were associated with two different programs, which may have led to variations in their delivery of the model.

- An additional limitation was noticed during the implementation of the study. Since the initial referral of students as "connected" and "less connected" did not

emerge as an important distinction, it could have been more meaningful to include participants who were unconnected to advising.

The following future research is recommended:

- Conduct a qualitative study to evaluate the effectiveness of advising associated with a success course with a larger pool of participants whose demographic characteristics match more precisely with the student body as a whole. Include advisors who are all associated with the same program. Such a study could evaluate the findings of the current study and add to the literature on collaborative forms of advising.

- Use a qualitative study to explore student perceptions of the four dimensions of advising revealed in the current study. If this study were designed with a larger pool of participants whose demographics matched more precisely with that of the institution at large, it could offer valuable information about the aspects of advising viewed as most valuable by students.

- Conduct a qualitative study to explore the dimensions of personal transformation among community-college students.

- Conduct qualitative research on the distinction between "barriers" and "obstacles" for community college students and whether existing resources address these two areas of student experience. As in previous examples, it would be important to select a pool of participants whose demographic characteristics closely match those of the student population as a whole.

- Finally, conduct a qualitative study on advising that includes participants who did not make a connection with the advisor, despite reminders and invitations. Data

on these students' perceptions would add to the literature since it would suggest new ways to develop proactive approaches to advising.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study addressed perceptions of participants' transition-to-college experiences, with particular attention to pre-college barriers, ongoing obstacles, levels of engagement, and perceptions of advising. The findings indicate that even students with the highest level of pre-college barriers could successfully establish networks of support, experience personal transformation, and persist toward graduation.

The study results point to the value of informal networks of support for participants. Such informal networks of support generate facilitative experiences leading toward personal transformation. I found that the collaboration of student-affairs staff with faculty, especially in the delivery of the student-success course, was a valuable contributor toward enhanced student engagement and persistence.

The study's conclusions and policy recommendations included a variety of strategies for incorporating the concept of informal advising networks into the existing advising paradigms. Each of the advising models from the literature, such as prescriptive, developmental, advising-as-teaching, proactive, and validating, was enhanced by the intentional development of students' informal networks of support. By helping students to expand their informal networks of support and draw validation from that community of faculty, staff, and peers, students experienced the personal transformation required to achieve college persistence and eventual career success. Students who undergo these personal changes and become more self-confident, assertive,

engaged in learning, and committed to goals are more likely to persist toward graduation and emerge with greater lifelong opportunities for themselves and their families.

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Appendix A
Participant Consent Form

Consent For Participation In Research

Project Title: Navigating the obstacles of college transition: student perceptions of advising offered in the context of a community-college success course

Principal Investigator(s): Michele Pavitt, student in the University of Southern Maine Ph.D. program in Public Policy with a Concentration in Educational Leadership and Policy; Faculty advisor is Catherine Fallona, Ph.D., Chair of the program.

Introduction:

- Please read this form or you may also request to have the form read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, to document your decision.

- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

- This project is a research study that will be done during the fall of this year. The researcher created the project to find out more about college students' experience in their first semester. She hopes to learn more about students' experience in a required first-year class at a New England community college that includes meetings with a college advisor.

- The researcher is completing the project as an assignment for her Ph.D. program at University of Southern Maine.

Who will be in this study?

- Students at a New England community college who completed a student-success course in fall of 2017 that included meetings with their advisor were considered as participants in the study.
- You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

What will I be asked to do?

- Participation in the research study is optional.
- Students who agree to participate will be interviewed three times during the fall semester of this year.
- The interviews will last approximately 45 minutes and will be tape recorded.
- The researcher will ask questions about students' experience in transitioning to college and in their first-semester student-success class that was co-facilitated by their advisor.
- Students who agree to be interviewed will receive a $10 stipend at the start of the project and another $10 stipend once the third interview is complete.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

- There is a risk that students might experience stressful emotions during the interviews if, for example, the questions cause them to remember difficult experiences of their first semester of college.

- The researcher will therefore be careful to assess students' reactions to questions and will remain supportive and respectful during the interviews.

- The researcher will also protect the confidentiality of all student participants.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

- It is possible that participants will benefit from the study because the experience may help them to more fully reflect on their transition to college and understand what that experience means to them. For example, they might realize that they have become more confident of their goals within the past year.

- There may also be benefits to the researcher since it will allow her to complete an assignment for her graduate degree. It is also hoped that the community college will benefit from the research study, since it will help administrators to see what aspects of the student-success class and first-year advising are viewed positively or negatively by students. The results could help the college to improve such programs for future students.

What will it cost me?

- Efforts will be made to choose public meeting places for interviews that are convenient for participants. If participants needed to pay for transportation to the interviews, however, the researcher could reimburse students for this expense.

- In order to be reimbursed for transportation, the student would be asked to fill out a reimbursement form detailing the form of transportation, number of miles, etc.

How will my privacy be protected?

- The interviews will be held at a location away from the college campus in order to protect the identities of participants.

- When possible, the interviews will be held at public libraries where a private study room will be reserved in advance.

How will my data be kept confidential?

- The names of participants will not be used on documents related to the research study. Instead, a code will be assigned to each participant and used on all documents.

- Documents will not be stored on computers connected to the college computer network and paper files or documents will be stored at a safe location away from the college campus.

- This study is designed to be anonymous, meaning that no one besides the researcher will be able to link interview comments to you, or identify you as a participant.

- Recordings of interviews will be erased at the completion of the study.

- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only the researcher will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

- The following additional precautions will be taken to protect participants' data:

    - Individually identifiable data will be destroyed after the study is complete.

    - Data will be encrypted using industry standards.

- All direct identifiers will be removed as soon as possible.

- Code lists and data files will be maintained in separate secure locations.

- Computer passwords will be protected.

What are my rights as a research participant?

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the community college or USM.

- You may skip or refuse to answer any interview question for any reason.

- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. (The second $10 stipend will be provided only to students who complete all three interviews, however.)

Whom may I contact with questions?

- The researcher conducting this study is Michele Pavitt, student in the Ph.D. program in Public Policy with a concentration in Educational Leadership and Policy at University of Southern Maine. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at michele.pavitt@maine.edu.

- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Catherine Fallona, Ph.D.,

Professor and Chair, Ph.D. in Public Policy with a Concentration in Educational

Leadership and Policy. She serves as the dissertation advisor for the researcher.

- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you

  may call the USM Human Protections Administrator at (207) 228-8434 and/or

  email usmorio@maine.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

- The results from this study will be published through an online database of Ph.D.
  dissertations. If you would like to receive a copy, please contact me at the email
  address or phone number listed below.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits

associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the

research and do so voluntarily.

Participant's signature or   Date

Legally authorized representative

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_____

Researcher's signature   Date

_____

Printed name

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Interview 1:

The first interview for each participant was focused in general, "grand tour" questions designed to introduce the researcher to the student's overall perception of his or her transition to college (Spradley, 1979).

- How did you make your decision to start college last year?

- How did you choose to attend the college?

- What were some of your first impressions of the college?

- Please describe the level of support you received from family and friends for your choice to attend college.

- How confident did you feel in your academic abilities when you started college? Has it changed since then?

- How accepted did you feel by the college community during your first semester of college?

- How supported did you feel by faculty during your first semester? Can you offer examples?

- How confident did you feel in your choice of major when you started college? Has this level of confidence changed since then?

- In your first semester, how did your skills at time-management evolve?

- In your first semester, how did your level of motivation as a college student change?

- As you look back on your first year of college, how confident do you feel that you made the right decision to enroll in college?

Interview 2:

The second interview focused on the students' experience of advising offered in the context of the student-success course. These "experience questions" attempted to elicit more specific examples to illustrate the student's perception of the student-success intervention (Spradley, 1979).

- How would you describe your first impressions of the student-success course?
- Please describe any topics covered in the class that you found helpful.
- Please describe any topics covered in the class that you did not find helpful.
- Please describe any in-class discussions or exercises that you found helpful.
- Please describe any in-class discussions or exercises that you did not find helpful.
- Do you feel that a supportive, "validating" experience was created in the class? Could you offer examples?
- How would you describe your perception of the team-taught aspect of the class? How was your experience influenced by the fact that an instructor and advisor participated in the class?
- How helpful did you find the individual meetings with an advisor?

- What did you talk about in your meetings with the advisor? How supported as a student did you feel in these meetings?

- Why do you think these meetings were required for the class?

- How would you describe the working relationship you developed with your advisor? Your instructor?

- To what degree did you develop supportive relationships with peers in your class? With others at the college?

- How would you describe the influence of the class and the advising experience on your transition to college?

- Please explain whether you feel that the college should continue to offer the first-semester course that is co-facilitated by an instructor and advisor.

- What other types of support would be helpful for first-semester students?

Interview 3:

The third interview focused on interpreting students' answers from previous interviews and probing more deeply into the essence of the experience (Seidman, 2013).

- How did your experience starting college compare to other times you've started something new?

- How would you describe your overall impression of your first year of college? How did it differ from what you were expecting?

- What are your most positive and most negative memories from your student-success class and first-semester advising?

- Do you feel that the collaboration of faculty and staff in the course had any influence on your experience of the transition to college?

- To what degree did your experience in the course and first-semester advising make you feel accepted by the college community? Could you offer examples to illustrate your answer?

- How did the course and the advising experience help you to gain confidence as a college student (if at all)?

- How did the course and your advising experience help you to be more engaged as a learner (if at all)?

- How successful do you feel now as a college student?

- How have you changed since you started college?

- What kind of support do you wish the college had offered in your first semester?

- If we could change one thing about the course and first-semester advising, what should it be?

- To what degree did the course and your first-year advising experience help you to clarify your short- and long-term goals?

Appendix C
Pilot Study Summary

June 10, 2018

The pilot study involved interviews with one student who had also experienced advising offered in the context of a success course, but was not available to participate in the study. The three planned interviews were conducted in a shortened format. The duration of each interview was about 20 minutes and questions on college-transition experience and advising were included. The student offered rich detail about his experiences, including previous attitudes toward education, personal crisis, self-exploration, academic disengagement, need for support, goal assessment, academic engagement, pride in achievement, and other themes. Overall, the pilot interviews demonstrated that the interview protocol of the study held promise for understanding the college-transition experience of students with some possible adjustments. The data suggested that the combination of such theories as validation, sense of belonging, proactive advising, collaborative advising, engagement, and involvement can serve as a meaningful background for studying the college-transition experience. However, the additional themes of "state of mind," and "source of motivation" were mentioned repeatedly during the interviews.

Data Collection and Protection of Confidentiality

The interviews took place at a study room at the library of a nearby university and were recorded using two digital devices. The location was chosen to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee, as discussed in the "Risk, Protection, and Confidentiality" section of the dissertation proposal. I did not provide the name of the

student on any transcriptions, coding charts, or other documents associated with the study. I also did not share the name with any other person.

The interview questions were posed briefly, in an open-ended manner and I attempted to refrain from interjecting comments or sounds while the student was speaking. The student provided stories and reflections on a wide range of experiences including high-school study habits, family tragedy, mental illness, full-time work experience, attitudes toward college, perception of college support systems, involvement on campus, and other topics.

The interviews were transcribed using the online Trint transcribing service, based in the UK. The transcribed interviews were checked against the recorded interviews and corrections were made to ensure verbatim reproduction of the interviews. The Trint service offers high levels of security since the process is conducted completely through its computer system and no human has access to the recorded files (Trint, 2018).

Coding, categorizing, and generating themes

The transcriptions were copied into a coding chart and "chunks of data" (Beaudry and Miller, 2016). were selected for analysis. I made the "first pass" through the data with the themes from the literature review in mind. For example, I selected comments related to a need for validation, sense of belonging, proactive advising, collaborative advising, academic engagement, and college involvement.

For example, the student spoke of a need for validation that emerged from a painful experience of loss that occurred just prior to starting college. A need for validation may be more acute for a student who perceives him- or herself as a "people pleaser." It can be experienced by a student who appears to be a confident, high achiever

in the classroom. Thus, the pilot study offered insight into the effectiveness of the interview protocol and provided examples of these elements within the lived experience of a student.

Memos, Bracketing, and Audit Trails

I also conducted a simultaneous process of self-evaluation during the pilot study. I used memos on the coding charts to summarize the experience of listening to the recorded interview, choosing "chunks of data" for analysis, and generating possible themes. The memo-writing experience offered opportunities for reliving the experience of the interview and perceiving reactions of bias, compassion, concern, or connection within my own lived experience.

For example, the student spoke of his decision as a high-school sophomore to refrain from doing his homework. He provided his rationale for making the decision, offered several consequences of the choice, speculated on how it was related to a tendency toward procrastination, and revealed its effect on his relationship with his parents. I did not interrupt or comment on these observations during this portion of the interview. However, at the completion of the student's comments on the matter, I revealed that my own son had made a similar decision in junior-high school regarding his math homework.

The sharing of a personal story momentarily shifted the dynamic of the conversation and allowed the student to glimpse my own personal life. In the memo, I noted "Personal sharing with student from my own experience. Moment of deeper understanding; convergence of roles as a mother, advisor, and researcher. Student offers honest reconstruction of previous experience, stated with self-acceptance, sense of

confidence, yet some regret." The memo therefore allowed me to become aware of how the student's story triggered memories and emotions that perhaps influenced my perception of the student's story.

I used bracketing within the body of the transcription to capture my reactions, questions, or biases to individual statements by the student. When asked about his perception of the proactive advising experience, for example, the student commented on his perception that many other students at the college would benefit from proactive advising: "…They just seem kind of like they're just picking classes willy nilly. Yeah. And to me that seems like a waste of time." The researcher added the bracketed comment: [Personal reaction here, sense of pride that he feels the work is worthwhile. He seems honest in his comments.] Another example of bracketing occurred when the student was discussing the collaborative classroom experience. I interrupted with a suggestion for improving the class: "We could start out with a survey." The bracketed comment captured my doubts about this intrusion into the student's thought process: [Interjection of an idea. Maybe not good practice; leading question? Try to refrain from this in the future?]

At each stage of the process, I was forced to weigh the options and make coding decisions. For example, did the student's experience of being dropped from AP classes fit better into "Engagement" or "Validation?" Would it be useful to include a phrase after each main theme providing detail – or would it only confuse the process? If other topics are discussed repeatedly, such as "Source of motivation," should this be considered a major theme? What about the overlap of the two themes "Proactive advising and Validation?" For example, the student mentioned benefits of advising, such as getting

answers to questions, getting help with the transfer process, having accountability as a student. These factors could arguably be placed into either of the two advising themes.

Themes Related to Validation and Sense of Belonging

The first interview of the project was informed by two student-persistence theories, Validation (Rendon, 1994) and Sense of Belonging (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Here is a list of themes generated from the interviews that corresponded to these theories:

Validation, HS school teachers still liked me

Validation (lack of), school placed him in lower classes

Validation, avoided procrastination

Sense of Belonging; difficulty connecting with peers

Sense of Belonging; never felt he was not accepted

Sense of Belonging; unmotivated students

Themes Related to Proactive Advising and Student-Success Course

The Intervention phase of the project was associated with two student-persistence theories: proactive advising, (Heisserer & Parette, 2002) and advising associated with a student-success course (Kuh et al., 2008). Here is a list of themes generated from the interviews that corresponded to these theories:

Proactive advising, would otherwise have not used it

Proactive advising, recruited for program

Proactive advising, accountability

Success course, more individualized

Success course, value of money management

Success course, study skills

Engagement and Involvement Theories

The Post-Intervention phase of the project was associated with two student-persistence theories: engagement theory, (Kuh et al., 2008); involvement theory (Astin, 1984). Here is a list of themes generated from the interviews that corresponded to these theories:

Engagement, top of class through sixth grade

Engagement, decided didn't need enforcement of learning, homework.

Involvement, work-study job

Themes of "State of Mind" and "Source of Motivation"

The pilot study also generated several themes that did not correspond directly to the primary variables of barriers, advising, and engagement.

State of mind, long history of ups and downs

State of mind, rejected by girlfriend

State of mind, loss of grandmother

Source of motivation, long commute, 10-hour workday

Source of motivation, job on phone in cubicle

Source of motivation, enjoys work-study job

Conclusion

The pilot study demonstrated that many aspects of the college-transition experience are associated with the retention theories discussed in the literature review. However, themes of "sources of motivation" and "state of mind" seemed to be significant factors of the experience that were unexpected. In some cases, I observed a wide variation in applicability of themes. For example, the theme of "engagement" was noted 18 times whereas the theme of "involvement" was noted once.