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# The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey

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**The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey**


By

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I.  Previous Publication

This thesis includes [1] original papers that have been previously published/submitted for publication in peer reviewed journals, as follows:

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## ABSTRACT

Learners typically enter higher education by meeting the academic threshold placed on them by their institution; however, their ability or inability to traverse the multi-interactional elements of post-secondary life are what underlie the premise of this research study. Over 320,000 students begin their post-secondary journey at a Canadian institution each year (Statistics Canada, 2019), and of those students, approximately 20-25% will withdraw before their second year (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). Of the students who choose to attend a community college in the Greater Toronto Area, 29-45% will never complete their program (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013). However, questions have been raised as to learner preparedness when entering higher education and whether today's learners possess the non-cognitive skill levels needed to handle their new learning environment and to adequately engage with the resources designed to support their transition, success, and retention (Adams, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). As a result, this study explored the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in today's college learners, along with the impact these skills have on their post-secondary journey. More specifically, the *how* and *what* stakeholders have experienced with non-cognitive skills were explored to understand its impact on student post-secondary experiences, academic and social development, engagement, and ultimately the decision-making process and ability to persist to graduation. Qualitative data were collected in the fall of 2019 at an Ontario community college located in the Greater Toronto Area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis as the research method. In total, the lived experiences of nine college stakeholders consisting of three students, two staff members, two faculty members, and two administrators were analyzed and interpreted to gain the perspectives of those who occupy the Ontario college ecosystem. Although not generalizable, results showed that staff,

faculty members, and administrators perceived non-cognitive skills to be lacking among today's college learners at a recognizable level. This, in turn, was said to contribute to student difficulties with juggling new responsibilities, coping with tragedies, forming new friendships and social circles, participating in academic and social activities, and making controlled decisions. These skill deficiencies were also found to contribute to students questioning their place within higher education and to situations where bumps along the college journey cannot be overcome. Student participants of this study held varying views regarding current skill levels. Student stories revealed perceptions of non-cognitive skill levels among the student population as *lacking*, *good*, and *unknown*. Nonetheless, non-cognitive skills were found to have a positive impact on a learner's post-secondary journey and all stakeholder groups identified a need for institutions to work toward developing these skills among their student population. Three recommendations were offered to build community awareness and create skill-development opportunities. The recommendations encouraged institutions to: 1) plan, integrate, and embed non-cognitive skills development in all facets of college life from student services to the classroom; 2) raise non-cognitive skills awareness and development through exposure and education; 3) provide upfront disclosure of the essential skills needed for program and student success.

## **DEDICATION**

I want to first acknowledge how very humbling and personal of an experience this research and doctoral journey has been for me. The completion of this chapter in my learning journey would not be possible without the support, encouragement, and love that I received throughout this process. To my children, parents, grandmother, and Geri, I dedicate this dissertation to you all!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## LIST OF TABLES

## LIST OF FIGURES

## LIST OF APPENDICES

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/SYMBOLS

| | |
|---|---|
| IT | Information technology |
| IPA | Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis |
| KPI | Key Performance Indicators |
| LGBTQ | Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer |
| OCCMF | Ontario Community College Multi-Site Form |
| REB | Research Ethics Board |
| TA | Teaching Assistant |
| TCPS2 | Tri-Council Policy Statement (2nd Edition) |

## NOMENCLATURE

A1          Administrator participant one

A2          Administrator participant two

F1          Faculty participant one

F2          Faculty participant two

N=          Number of participants

S1          Student participant one

S2          Student participant two

S3          Student participant three

SFA         Staff, Faculty, Administrator stakeholder group

Stf1        Staff participant one

Stf2        Staff participant two

## Chapter 1: The Problem Defined

**Background**

Achieving a post-secondary education can be multifaceted, lifelong, and offer both personal and societal benefits. Confidence, personal development, and potentially greater job prospects have all been associated with the attainment of a post-secondary education. What was once reserved for society's privileged has increasingly become more accessible to learners from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds around the world (Berger et al., 2012; TVA Films, 1999). Attributing to the increase in post-secondary attendance include, but are not limited to, the rise of part-time, distance and online learning, as well as an increase in student financial aid options, educational funding, and a growing societal need for a post-secondary education to actively compete in local and global labour markets (AUCC, 2011).

The rise in post-secondary attendance is exampled in the 2014-2015 academic year when post-secondary enrolment in Canada stood at 2,054,943, an increase of approximately 0.3% from the previous year (Statistics Canada, 2016). Nevertheless, although enrolment in Canadian post-secondary institutions continue to exceed the two million mark (Statistics Canada, 2017), approximately 20-25% of students withdraw from their studies in their first year, and only about 60% will ultimately complete their credential (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). Student attrition rates drop slightly lower when students who transfer to another program or institution are excluded from the calculation; however, even at slightly lower numbers, attrition rates in the Canadian post-secondary system still remain at significant levels, with equally significant implications.

It is important to acknowledge that not all student attrition is considered negative, as there are a number of learners who decide to withdraw from their studies because their life goals do not desire or require higher education (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). However, often students

who withdraw early from their studies miss out on the type of personal development uniquely gained from the post-secondary experience. These students also forfeit time, money, and the potential for greater job opportunities that would typically come from higher education (Drea, 2004; Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Lee, 2017; O'Keeffe, 2013; Stelnicki et al., 2015; Tinto, 1993). From an institutional perspective, student attrition results in a loss of tuition revenues and potential government grant funding; this, in turn, can have an overall negative impact on local and global economies (Drea, 2004; Freeman et al., 2007; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Lee, 2017; O'Keeffe, 2013; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2012; Stelnicki et al., 2015).

What may be contributing to these attrition numbers is an assumption that students who gain admission into college or university are somehow equipped with both the cognitive and non-cognitive skills required to achieve academic and social successes. However, even the most brilliant minds that enter post-secondary life can find hardship in their journey when confronted with an unfamiliar learning environment, a new social structure, unknown school policies, processes, or services, as well as when faced with greater independence (Stelnicki et al., 2015). This is especially true when lacking the necessary skill set to be able to cope with the stressors of school, effectively work and communicate with others, seek out relevant information, problem-solve, or exhibit the needed motivation to persevere past obstacles. Entering higher education with a deficiency in these skills could be the underlying reason why despite a growth in student retention strategies (Berger et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012), student attrition rates have remained relatively stagnant in North America for at least three decades (Fisher & Engemann, 2009). Entering higher education with the cognitive ability to handle the academic rigor is often not enough to succeed and persist in an environment that requires students to also possess non-

cognitive skills such as resilience, optimism, adaptability, conscientiousness, motivation, perseverance, reliability, self-advocacy, and self-regulation (Adams, 2012; Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Egalite et al., 2016). These skills, also commonly referred to in literature as *soft skills, 21*[st] *century skills, employability skills, generic skills, transferable skills or life skills,* will be used interchangeably throughout this research paper, and are said to not only impact personal development and academic success, but also are considered to be key factors for career and life advancements (Brunello & Schlotter, 2011; Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Devadason et al., 2010; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kautz et al., 2014; Lizzio & Wilson, 2004; Padhi, 2014).

Soft skills differ from hard skills as they involve various personal traits, also known as people skills. The dynamic nature of people skills is what often make non-cognitive skills hard to quantify and equally difficult to measure (Cukier et al., 2015; Taylor, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that consensus around abilities that are considered soft skills is rare (Cukier et al., 2015) and "no globally accepted definition" exists (Taylor, 2016, p. 3). Additionally, discrepancies surround how influential cognitive factors are in skills such as *critical thinking* (Cukier et al., 2015), while *problem solving* has been referred to as the *soft skills of cognitive style* (Riyanti et al., 2017). Moreover, there is no doubt that underlying cognitive factors are at play when communicating orally or through written means. However, it must be noted that these skills are commonly categorized as soft skills, especially in the Canadian context, and will be considered as such in this study since a sense of awareness (Cukier et al., 2015) and emotional intelligence are needed to employ these skills effectively. For the purpose of this research study, soft skills will be defined as any skill or individual trait that assists in, or is vital to, effective interactions with others; it is associative "with an individual's personality, temperament, and

attitudes" (ACT, 2014, para. 4). In contrast, hard or technical skills are attributes that are typically more observably taught and function as a primary objective for credentialed learning.

**Problem Statement**

Student attrition rates in higher education are most prevalent in the first year of study, with many post-secondary institutions implementing retention initiatives as an attempt to prevent students from dropping out (Astin, 1975; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Moxley et al., 2013; O'Keeffe, 2013; Tinto, 1987, 1993, 2006-2007). However, many of these retention initiatives assume that students entering higher education already possess the non-cognitive skills needed to engage effectively with the resources designed for their success and retention (Savitz-Romer & Boufford, 2012). Nevertheless, before focus can be shifted toward retention programs that concentrate on non-cognitive skills development, it is pertinent to explore whether a connection between non-cognitive skills and student retention truly exists. Therefore, in this research study I sought to explore the level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in today's post-secondary learner, as well as the influence these skills might have on a learner's post-secondary journey (experiences, development, engagement, and ultimately their decision or ability to persist to graduation).

**Positionality and Worldview**

*Positionality*

It should be acknowledged that the catalyst for this research was heavily derived from my personal and professional life experiences. Over two decades of working with adult learners in the post-secondary sector cultivated a keen interest in understanding the reasons why some students are able to persist to graduation, while others withdraw and never return. It was about eleven years ago when I was seconded to a special project to investigate and pilot student

retention initiatives that I believe truly sparked this research and my passion for learning about student experiences and how they might impact one's educational decisions. I found that many brilliant minds were leaving their programs, not just because of personal or financial reasons, nor being in the wrong program, but, because they lacked self-confidence, resilience, the ability to manage their time appropriately, and the interpersonal skills necessary to deal with group dynamics or hurdles along their journey. The special project piloted two approaches that sought to retain first-year students. The first approach was an early warning program that identified students whom were at-risk of failing based on an early assessment(s) administered by faculty members. The second approach sought to enhance the first-year experience by attempting to connect students with institutional resources early in the semester. Both programs attempted to engage students with the social and academic supports created for their success.

Although I did not design the initial iteration of these retention initiatives, my involvement as a lead in their implementation allowed me the opportunity to speak directly with student participants and hear their varied stories. Many of these stories were reminiscent of the narratives shared by a few of my childhood friends and acquaintances, who, often possessed great potential; however, became consumed by institutional barriers and the negative perceptions projected on them by others. This often led to a fear of failure, which may have ultimately cut their promising educational journeys short.

The retention programs piloted, although created to be beneficial to all participants, assumed that every student knew how to negotiate the time necessary to access the program resources. It also assumed that all students had the ability to self-advocate by asking "the right" questions, and possessed the motivation needed to seek out resources and to decipher which ones might be best suited for their success. As an advisor at an Ontario community college, my

observations, conversations, and interactions with students have reinforced my belief that learners enter higher education with varying levels of non-cognitive skills and that these skills (or lack thereof) can impact a student's educational experience, their decision to remain in school when confronted with hurdles along the way, their continual development, and future successes. Moreover, informal discussions with colleagues about student resilience, self-advocacy, motivation, and self-regulation, have further raised questions for me about the influence non-cognitive skills might have on all facets of a student's post-secondary life. My last research project helped solidify, for me, the need for students to experience positive social and academic elements of post-secondary life so that a sense of belonging can be established. Gaining a sense of belonging to one's school was found to increase the likelihood of student retention, once non-negotiable factors that might force withdrawal were excluded (Lee, 2017). Between the two types of retention programs piloted over a decade ago, it was the first-year experience program that rendered a slight increase in student retention. However, I often wondered if the increase in retention might have been more impactful had non-cognitive skills been taken into consideration.

*Worldview*

I approached this research study using a philosophical worldview that is pragmatic in nature. Creswell (2009) described "pragmatism as a worldview" that can typically develop from situations (p. 10). My experiences as a mother, student, college employee, and researcher have informed my view that to truly understand a collective problem, the acknowledgement of multiple perspectives is required. Therefore, diverse perspectives from students, staff, faculty members, and administrators were collected for the purpose of piecing together a holistic understanding of the impact that non-cognitive skills might have on post-secondary experiences, development, engagement, and ultimately student retention.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore, through semi-structured interviews, the perceptions that students, staff, faculty members, and administrators have on the level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in today's post-secondary learners. Moreover, the perceived effect these skills (or lack thereof) might have on the post-secondary journey of college learners including the ways students experience college, their development, the ways in which they decide to engage with their college community (academically and socially), and ultimately their decisions or ability to persist to graduation were examined.

**Rationale for Dissertation**

The gathering and analysis of data were used to identify perceived non-cognitive skills gaps among adult learners with the goal of capturing the lived experiences of those who occupy the Ontario college ecosystem. The real, current, and potentially varied voices of students, staff, faculty members, and administrators was believed to be able to not only shed light on what is perceived to be post-secondary best practices, but also to provide a greater understanding of the perceived need for non-cognitive skills development in college learners by various stakeholders. This research study was conducted as a means of understanding the phenomenon at a micro level so that the roots of the issue could be exposed, which, in turn, might one day lead to the modification or the creation of new first-year transitional programs that more successfully reduce student attrition, and hopefully lessen the immediate and long-term barriers to success. As a result, I sought to explore the following research questions.

**Research Questions**

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with students, staff, faculty members, and administrators at an Ontario community college. The interviews provided data that sought to address the following two research questions:

1. *What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners?*

2. *How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and decisions to persist to graduation)?*

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are provided to ensure a clear understanding of the terms and their intended use throughout this research paper.

*Attrition* - "refers to a student who fails to re-enroll at an institution in consecutive semesters" (Berger et al., 2012, p. 12).

*Perceptions* – refers to the way in which a person interprets a situation from their point of view.

*Persistence* – refers "to the rate at which students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree" (Tinto, 2012, p. 127).

*Non-Cognitive Skills* – is a term that collectively includes *soft skills, 21ˢᵗ century skills, employability skills, generic skills, transferable skills or life skills*, and refers to any skill or individual trait that assists in, or is vital to, effective interactions with others. These skills are "associated with an individual's personality, temperament, and attitudes" (ACT, 2014, para. 4).

*Stakeholders* – refers to individuals who are members of, contributors to, or have a vested interest in an organization or cause.

*Student Development* – refers to a learner's academic and social maturity and growth.

*Student Engagement* – refers to the ability of a learner to interact with the various entities of their institution, this includes social and academic realms, e.g. institutional supports, staff, faculty members, extra-curricular activities.

*Student Retention*: "refers to the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation" (Berger et al., 2012, p. 12). This includes students who remain enrolled at their institution, but transfer to another program.

**Assumptions**

1. I bring to this research study the assumption that a person's perceptions are largely, if not completely, based on their lived experiences. What a person witnesses, reads, encounters, or endures through their life continues to shape the way they view the world, as well as how they believe the world views them. Moreover, their attitude toward school and how they deal with life situations stems from these lived experiences.

2. I also assume that learners, who enter higher education, enter post-secondary life with varying levels of non-cognitive skills.

**Scope of Study**

The scope of this research study was to explore the perceptions of college stakeholders on the impact that non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) have on post-secondary learners based on their own lived experiences. The perceptions sought were limited to participants at only one Ontario community college where the detailed accounts of nine individuals were sought (three student participants and two participants per faculty, staff, and administrator group). It is

acknowledged that the perceptions of only nine participants do not capture a large segment of the Ontario community college population, nor does it speak to the potential differences between college and university settings. However, the small number of participants was intended to honour participant voices by capturing and highlighting the depth of their stories (Smith & Osborn, 2003, 2004). Therefore, seeking generalizations was not the intention of this study, nor were any comparisons beyond the Ontario college system or with the university model, as this was beyond the study's scope. Demographic factors such as age, gender, sexual identity, and more, all largely factor into one's lived experiences and were partially captured in this study; however, it is also acknowledged that with the limited number of participants, capturing voices from a variety of different demographic backgrounds was not necessarily possible and was also beyond the scope of this research.

The following outlines the theoretical framework for this research study.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this research I will draw from Spady's (1970) *Sociological Model*, Tinto's (1987) *Student Integration* theory, and Astin's (1999) *Involvement Theory*, which is discussed in more detail in the review of literature that follows. Each of these three theories highlights the need for learners to be academically and socially engaged with their college environment in positive ways to increase their likelihood of being retained. This research aligns with Tinto's (1987) reasoning for using early intervention to address the social and academic adjustment concerns of first-year students entering college and adapts the theory of *transition pedagogy* that views success in a learner's first-year transition to college as a cohesive process that is an institution-wide effort. Furthermore, the framework will align these theories with the notion that students enter higher education with varying levels of non-cognitive skills, and are therefore not uniformly prepared to

engage with the social and academic supports created for their successful transition (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012; Tinto, 1987). Figure 1 graphically depicts the multiple layers of the student transition process, which is then followed by a review of literature.

**Figure 1**

*Student Transition*
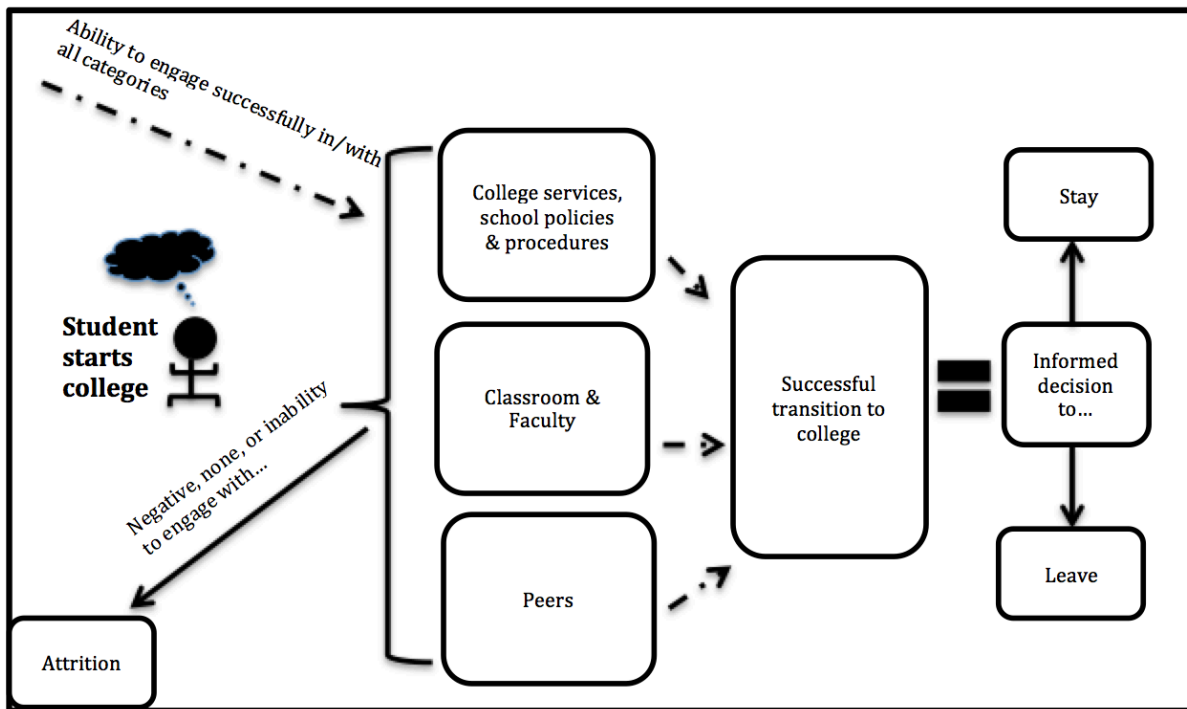


*Note*. This figure illustrates elements of the student transition process.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

**Introduction**

Student attrition has been a long-standing issue in higher education. Some of the earliest studies associated with attrition date back to the 1930s when student attrition was referred to as *student mortality* (McNeely, 1937; Morrison & Silverman, 2012). Scholars have attempted to combat this elusive issue for many years by studying and theorizing retention strategies. The extraordinary amount of retention research is exampled by a mere search of the term *student retention* through the online Google Scholar database; results will render over two million articles, yet, Canadian studies on the topic of student retention are far less prevalent than their American or Australian neighbours. Central to this research study was gaining an understanding of the possible links between non-cognitive skills and a student's post-secondary journey (experiences, development, engagement, and decisions or ability to persist to graduation). As a result, the following review, divided into four main sections, examines literature from around the world to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The first section of this review, titled *From Historical Underpinnings to Post-Secondary Readiness,* addresses the historical foundation of non-cognitive skills, the way these skills are developed, their relation to student retention theories, and, by extension, a student's readiness for higher education. The second section, titled *Ontario Community Colleges,* explores the characteristics of today's community college learners and the impact this potentially has on a student's journey and their ability to be retained by their institution. The third section examines literature on *Stakeholder Perceptions* of non-cognitive skills among post-secondary learners, while the final section looks at how best to teach such skills in adults through *Non-Cognitive Skill Intervention.*

It is important to note that portions of the following review of literature, although created for this research, have subsequently been published as an article titled, *Skills for the 21st Century: A Meta-Synthesis of Soft-Skills and Achievement* (Lee, 2018).

**From Historical Underpinnings to Post-Secondary Readiness**

*Non-Cognitive Skills*

Non-cognitive skills are considered to be relational in nature, involving both personal and interpersonal skills (Carblis, 2008). They are skills associated with "behaviors, attitudes, and strategies" (Egalite et al., 2016, p. 28), which typically display core competencies rooted in emotional intelligence (Carblis, 2008; National Soft Skills Association, 2015). *Emotional intelligence*, a term coined by Salovey and Mayer (1990), centers on having the ability to self-identify and regulate one's own emotions in addition to interpreting and responding accordingly to the emotions of other people (Chan et al., 2014; Martinez, 2010; National Soft Skills Association, 2015). A person with high emotional intelligence is not only self-aware and able to control their own feelings, but is also able to pick up on surrounding social cues and react in an appropriate manner. On the other hand, possessing an apt level of non-cognitive skills allows one to react or conduct one's self in an emotionally intelligent manner.

A predecessor to emotional intelligence theory is social intelligence, described as "the ability to *understand and manage* men and women, boys and girls-to act wisely in human relations" (Thorndike, 1920, p. 228). It differs from emotional intelligence as it only seeks to understand others, which is the reason it has been scrutinized for having a manipulative undertone (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence makes its distinction as it concerns itself with the acknowledgement of both "one's own and others' emotional states to solve problems and regulate behavior" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). In the case of emotional

intelligence, empathy becomes a vital characteristic in understanding ones' self, and others. Salovey and Mayer (1990) categorized empathy as being central for individuals to conduct themselves in emotionally intelligent ways, and, by extension, these learners are able to socialize successfully by engaging in a variety of interpersonal relationships.

Notably, almost five decades before emotional intelligence was founded, David Wechsler used the term *non-intellective* to describe a person's emotional, motivational, and volitional capacities as it relates to assessing human intellect. Wechsler (1943) credited a 1935 study by W. P. Alexander for pointing out that the unaccounted-for variance in intelligence tests could be interpreted as "traits of temperament" (p. 103). These traits included a person's "drive, persistence, and interest" and were seen as often a greater predictor of academic achievement than the ability measured in intelligence tests (Wechsler, 1943, p. 103). Notions of temperament, social and emotional intelligence, have all provided a basis for non-cognitive skills development.

### *Non-Cognitive Skills Development*

According to Cunha and Heckman (2007), non-cognitive skills are developed from a unique combination of genetic and environmental influences, with environmental effects taking shape prior to birth, as early as in utero; or according to Kail and Wicks-Nelson (1993) as early as the first week of a child being born. Similarly, Goleman (2005) posited that a person's temperament, from which non-cognitive skills are derived, is largely biological.

Early experiences are especially impactful during the most critical development stages of the brain, such as in the early childhood to adolescent years of life (Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Goleman, 2005; Kautz et al., 2014). Literature also points to parental influence (Blau & Currie, 2006; Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Goleman, 2005), and to a greater extent, a mother's ability to model empathic behaviour by teaching her children at an early stage to overcome fear, as well as

to cope and persevere beyond small stressors (Goleman, 2005). In turn, these emotionally supportive environments are said to produce individuals who are more adept at learning (Cunha & Heckman, 2007). In these instances children learn to become resilient in the face of adversity. In essence, training the brain is considered pivotal to learning the non-cognitive attributes that are critical for navigating through roadblocks and milestones in life. Research has shown that even children who are predisposed to an inhibited or melancholy temperament trait can learn to be uninhibited or upbeat (Kagan et al., 1992). Experiences during childhood shape the circuitry of the brain primarily concerned with emotional regulation (Goleman, 2005). Therefore, parental influence can be considered either positive or negative to childhood experiences, depending on a child's upbringing.

Although much of the literature points to the development of non-cognitive skills or traits as less likely to occur in adulthood (Almlund et al., 2011; Cunha & Heckman, 2007), studies also suggest skills and personality traits have the capacity of being transformed throughout a person's lifecycle (Kautz et al., 2014; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Roberts et al., 2006; Specht et al., 2011). Furthermore, Cunha and Heckman (2007) asserted the importance of continual development of non-cognitive skills throughout life in order to fortify previously learned skills. Yet, there is growing concern as to the level and type of non-cognitive skills needed for success both in higher education and the workforce. The following sections address the influence of non-cognitive skills on student retention and post-secondary readiness.

### Retention Theories

Although an extensive list of retention literature has accumulated for decades (Bean, 1980; Kamens, 1971; McNeely, 1937; Seidman, 2012), the early retention theories of William

Spady, Vincent Tinto, and Alexander Astin are among the most influential in the field of higher education.

**Spady's Sociological Model.** Spady's (1970) sociological model theorized that student departure was linked to the interaction a student has with the many facets of the institutional environment. According to Spady (1970), a student's ability to successfully assimilate into the academic and social systems of their institution increases their chances of retention. In the academic system, Spady (1970) determined success as the extrinsic reward of student grades as well as the intrinsic reward of intellectual growth. In the social system, two factors emerged as important, namely *normative congruence* and *friendship support*. *Normative congruence* concerned itself with students "having attitudes, interests, and personality depositions" that coincide with the characteristics and principles experienced within the institutional environment, while *friendship support* included the relationships that students form with others within the institution (Spady, 1970, p. 77). Spady (1970) attributed student maturity, which included non-cognitive factors such as "motivation, independence, flexibility, involvement, impulse control, self-confidence, responsibility, and rationality," as being necessary for assimilation into the academic and social systems (p. 73).

**Tinto's Integration Theory.** Vincent Tinto's theory of student integration furthered the idea that retention was largely based on a student's ability to find their place within the academic and social systems of the institution. The initial six weeks of a student's first semester was identified as a critical transitional period for students trying to adjust to post-secondary life (Tinto, 1987). This was said to be especially hard for those students lacking the skills to cope with their new environment (Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987) discussed the need for post-secondary institutions to approach retention initiatives in a student-centred manner, by putting the focus on

16

building "effective educational communities which seek to involve all students in their social and intellectual life" (p. 3). Tinto (1987) also suggested the establishment of early warning systems to identify students who might be considered at-risk for early departure and emphasized the importance of student interactions with faculty members, staff, and their peers both inside and outside of the classroom as essential for establishing a sense of community.

**Astin's Involvement Theory.** Likewise, Astin's *Involvement Theory*, which was derived from his 1975 research, looked to a student's engagement with their school environment as being predictive of their likelihood for leaving or staying (Astin, 1999). The more physical and intellectual energy a student would put into involving themselves with their school, theoretically, would render a higher probability that they would be retained (Astin, 1999).

All three theories, to some extent, focused on a student's ability to transition into post-secondary life with social and academic engagement as being predictors of student retention and success. These retention theories have existed for over four decades and have resulted in multiple attempts at creating and applying the *right* formula to support institutional student retention. For example, over the span of a decade scholars Kift et al. (2010) theorized and operationalized in Australia, three generational approaches that sought to foster learner engagement with their school environment as a means of enhancing first-year transitional experiences and student retention rates. A fourth generational approach was later theorized by Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2014), which furthered the idea of student retention as a communal effort by requiring both the local community and institution to be partners in fostering positive transitional experiences for first-year students.

**Generational Shifts.** Kift et al. (2010) described the first-generational approach to enhancing first-year transitional experiences as co-curricular based. Support services that

included, but were not limited to peer programs, student orientation activities, advising supports, and social events were implemented as a means of welcoming, supporting, and acclimatizing learners to their new post-secondary environment (Kift et al., 2010). A move to a more curriculum-based model was implemented in the second generation. Emphasis was placed on enhancing the transitional learning experiences of first-year students through strategic design of curriculum, which, in turn, was aimed at positively impacting teaching and learning practices (Kift, 2009; Kift et al., 2010). Generation three, characterized as *Transition Pedagogy*, sought to merge the previous two generations through the integration of curricular and co-curricular efforts. The premise of *Transition Pedagogy* was to unite previously siloed divisions and support practices to form a larger institution-wide collective. The necessity was for the collective (services, departments, faculties) to interconnect, reflecting cohesiveness both inside and outside the classroom. Kift et al. (2010) suggested that institutions, staff and faculty members be expected to play an integral role in the facilitation of student engagement and retention. For *Transition Pedagogy* to be successful, it must be comprehensive, organized, purposeful, and include all "disciplines, programs, and services" (Kift, 2009, p. 1). A move from siloed efforts to a more holistic means was seen as an essential move to fuse the many pieces of the whole institution (Kift et al., 2010). Kift's (2009) assertion of *Transition Pedagogy* was an effort to address Tinto's (2006-2007) acknowledgement of the disparaging retention rates that continued to linger; along with Tinto's (2006-2007) call to interpret previous "research and theory into effective practice" (p. 2).

Nonetheless, in 2014, Penn-Edwards and Donnison challenged Kift et al.'s *Transition Pedagogy* by suggesting that the time had come for a fourth generational model. The fourth generational approach emphasized social and civic factors and called for the building and

strengthening of a *First Year in Higher Education Community of Practice* (FYHECoP). In this

model, the post-secondary institution is to be viewed as one element of the greater whole

(society), and must work with the larger community to support student transition. Family,

friends, peers, and community professionals are to be acknowledged as key influencers, potential

supporters, and as fundamental entities to successful first-year student transitional experiences

(Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014).

Another take on transition theory, one that has influenced post-secondary practice and

visioning, is Lizzio's five senses of successful transition. Lizzio (2006) asserted that students

have five areas of need that institutions should address to increase learner probability of success

and retention. The areas include: 1) *A student's sense of capability* – by ensuring students are in

some way active contributors to their learning community as well as understand institutional

expectations and the basic academic skills needed (Lizzio, 2006). 2) *A student's sense of*

*connectedness* – by ensuring learners feel connected, are involved, and have "good working

relationships" with members of their institution; such as fellow peers and staff members (Lizzio,

2006, p. 2). 3) *A student's sense of purpose* – by ensuring learners see purpose in their academic

pursuits, are able to set personal goals and align them with their chosen career aspirations. A

clear sense of purpose was said to increase a student's likelihood of finding satisfaction in their

studies, as well as the likelihood they will persist through academic challenges encountered

along the way (Lizzio, 2006). 4) *A student's sense of resourcefulness* – according to Lizzio

(2006), successful students are able to "proactively manage the challenges of their whole

university experience" (p. 2), which includes students who are able to access resources, supports,

and balance their academic, work, and other life commitments. 5) *A student's sense of academic*

*culture* – by ensuring that students understand the role and purpose of higher education and the

value post-secondary attendance will bring to their life was said to lead to successful students (Lizzio, 2006).

In each generational strategy, as well as in Lizzio's five senses, students are expected to effectively engage with the many elements of the institutional environment. In the case of the FYHECoP, engagement beyond the depths of the institution was hypothesized for success and retention to occur. As for Lizzio's (2006) five senses of successful transition, acknowledgement of the institution's role in learner capability and capacity building were central for engagement to occur. The fundamental piece for all retention theories reviewed, new and old; is for learners to engage with the institutional elements that surround them. In a study by Bowman et al. (2019) the importance of non-cognitive skills to retention and student interaction were explored.

The study included 16 four-year American post-secondary institutions in which first-year students were surveyed to investigate the relationship that *self-efficacy*, *time management*, *self-discipline*, and *grit* has on student retention between the first and second year of studies (Bowman et al., 2019). It should be noted that *grit*, as defined by Duckworth et al. (2007), is the "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). The authors of the study concluded that "noncognitive attributes are strongly and positively related to academic achievement," which, in turn, make them "strongly associated" to learner retention (Bowman et al., 2019, p. 147). The study also revealed that *self-efficacy, time management, self-discipline,* and *grit* are highly interrelated and at times interdependent on one another. Moreover, these four non-cognitive traits were said to impact how a person interacts with their institution and to have a positive correlation to a learner's social adjustment (Bowman et al., 2019). However, literature also suggests that students often lack the non-cognitive attributes needed to effectively

participate in and with the social and academic activities designed by their schools (Adams, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

***Post-Secondary Readiness***

According to Adams (2012), life skills such as "resiliency and grit, along with the ability to communicate and advocate" (para. 1) are lacking amongst students, and in turn, are affecting student retention rates, along with the retention efforts that have been put in place. According to Adams (2012), students are not building life skills because they have not had the chance to face adversity and build back from it. For example, there is debate over high schools that have a no-zero policy. The no-zero policy is a strategy implemented across various Canadian school boards as a means of discouraging teachers from failing students or from providing a zero grade for assignments. Although, not allowing students to fail has been seen as an opportunity for teachers to find other ways of helping students to be successful (Brown, 2007; CTV News, 2016); others have argued that students who have experienced little to no repercussions in high school for missed or late work, will ultimately fail to learn the transferrable skills needed to succeed beyond high school and into adulthood (Smusiak, n.d.). In essence, retention programs have been largely built on the premise that students already have the appropriate level of non-cognitive skills to identify, seek, and interact with school supports in effective ways. Researchers Schutte and Malouff seemingly took a step forward into testing this theory.

In a study of 152 first-year students at a private university in the United States of America, researchers Schutte and Malouff (2002) used a first-year transitional course to infuse and measure emotional skills in course curriculum. The study consisted of two student groups. One group was enrolled in a course that had an emotions-theme, while the other course did not.

Courses differed in that the emotions-themed group had assignments and readings that were reflective in nature and emotionally driven.

Study results showed an increase in emotional skills, along with higher retention rates for the students in the emotions-themed group after their first year of study (Schutte & Malouff, 2002). These results coincide with the notion that learning affective traits, such as non-cognitive skills, are best learned over a period of time when embedded and connected with course content for transfer to occur (Hattie et al., 1996; Hazzan & Har-Shai, 2013). However, scholars have also suggested "various student groups require different types of institutional engagement" (Lee, 2017, p. 5). Dietsche (1990) found integration into the academic environment rather than the social sphere, along with a learner's commitment to their educational success, to be greater predictors of persistence for commuter students. Therefore, diversity among students, and, by extension, their unique needs, also factor into their desire to engage with their institution. Thus, the characteristics of college learners are considered important to understanding the type of integration (social or academic) students might require to feel connected to their school (O'Keeffe, 2013), to potentially enhance their post-secondary journey (experiences, development, engagement), and to increase their likelihood of remaining enrolled.

**Ontario Community Colleges**

Community Colleges and Universities primarily dominate Canada's Ontario post-secondary system; however, private vocational schools and theological schools are also included in this sector (Jones, 2014; Jones & Skolnik, 2009; Usher, 2018). There are currently 24 community colleges in Ontario, seven of which are designated as Polytechnic institutions (Algonquin, Conestoga, Fanshawe, George Brown College, Humber, Seneca, Sheridan College). Described as a cross between a college and university (Polytechnics Canada, n.d.; Usher, 2018),

polytechnics are said to fuse "the practical approach of a college education and the depth of study usually associated with a university program" (Polytechnics Canada, n.d., para. 2). These institutions commonly offer four-year applied degrees in addition to a variety of certificates, diplomas, and post-graduate credentials that are traditionally offered at the college level (Polytechnics Canada, n.d.). However, it should also be noted that 14 of the community colleges in Ontario, including those not affiliated with Polytechnics Canada, have degree-granting authority (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, n.d.), demonstrating that polytechnic status is not compulsory for Ontario community colleges to offer applied baccalaureate degrees. This could account for the reason Jones and Skolnik (2009) described the term *polytechnic* as one "fraught with ambiguity" (p. 1). Although, universities in Ontario have traditionally been considered the governing body for degree offerings, Ontario's community colleges received degree-granting authority in the year 2000 (Skolnik, 2016). The diverse composition, continuous growth, and evolving role of Ontario's community colleges over the past 50 plus years to continually offer "advanced training" has brought about such change (Skolnik, 2016, p. 1).

### *Formation of Colleges*

Ontario colleges were formed between 1965 and 1967 by William (Bill) G. Davis, Minister of Education at the time, to address three main societal needs: the "knowledge explosion," "technological revolution," and "population explosion" (Davis, 1965, pp. 8-9; MacKay, 2014). At the time, Davis (1965) asserted that completion of secondary school for all citizens had become a societal normalcy and that it was now time to "recognize the inevitability of some form of post-secondary education (i.e. beyond Grade 12) for all capable of profiting from it" (p. 8). The need to advance knowledge and skills to a segment of the population not

previously served in the school system was seen as the cornerstone of community colleges in Ontario (Davis, 1965; Mackay, 2014). Colleges, at the time, provided upgrading and vocational advancements to a growing population that needed skills beyond high school to compete in an advancing workforce. Learners were comprised of people with varying skills and of different age groups, aptitudes, and socio-economic statuses (Davis, 1965). At over half of a century of existence, Ontario colleges still provide upgrading and vocational advancements to a variety of learners; however, the diversity of learners, enrolment numbers, and range of credentials offered has seen a noticeable change over time.

### *Characteristics of College Learners*

Prior to the implementation of Ontario colleges, less than 10% of "Canadian youth" went to university (Mackay, 2014, p. 11). Nevertheless, as of 2004 that number increased to "approximately 40% of youth attended either college or university" (Mackay, 2014, p. 11). Today's Ontario colleges work with over 500,000 individuals yearly, with an institutional make-up consisting of learners who study full-time, part-time, online, in-person or a combination of those options (Colleges Ontario, 2017). Literature suggests the diversity in college course delivery and student population are variables that positively impact student persistence and experiences, and are to be taken into consideration for institutional retention efforts (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Tinto, 2012).

**Impact on Retention.** While the traditional age of college learners is said to range from 18-20 (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005), and in some instances from18-22 (Jacoby, 2015), approximately 60% of Ontario college applicants are aged 21 or older (Colleges Ontario, 2017) and are often categorized as *mature learners*. It should also be noted that the definition of *mature learner* can vary and include individuals younger than 21; as exampled by the Ontario Colleges Application

Services which defines mature status as "applicants who are over 19 years old and do not have a high school diploma or GED" (OCAS, n.d., para. 1). According to Bean and Metzner (1985), when it comes to socialization, integration, and the transition of first-year learners, nontraditional students, including those classified as mature learners, are more likely to place less value on extracurricular activities and informal interactions with faculty members. Bean and Metzner (1985) accounted for established "self-control and values typically identified with maturity" (p. 488) as the reason for a lesser desire to engage with the institution outside of class time (extracurricular activities). Findings in the Lee (2017) study of part-time college students corroborate these findings. Lee (2017) found that part-time learners, many of which are mature learners, place social events and extracurricular activities as least important in their post-secondary pursuits. The time needed to engage in extracurricular activities were found to be limited for college learners who held responsibilities, in addition to their schooling, outside of the institution (Lee, 2017). Mature learners often enter post-secondary studies while also contending with family, employment, or other commitments (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Kuh, 2005; Lee, 2017).

According to Colleges Ontario (2017), almost a quarter of college applicants in the 2016-2017 academic year reported household incomes of less than $30,000 per year, while nearly 50% were below $60,000. Many students work while attending college, particularly learners from low-income backgrounds (Tinto, 2012). In the 2016-2017 academic year it was also reported that roughly 64% of Ontario college applicants were employed either full- or part-time (Colleges Ontario, 2017). Ontario community colleges are typically considered to be commuter schools; students attend classes and leave, adding to the prospect of little or no time to engage on campus outside of class time (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Jacoby, 2015; Lee, 2017; Tinto, 2012). In the Lee

(2017) study, it was suggested that commuter institutions provide more flexibility when attempting to engage their learners. Lee (2017) asserted that institutions' need to be cognizant when planning events so that they include content and delivery options (online, evening, or weekend formats) suitable for mature learners to begin to meet the varying lifestyle needs of today's college population. According to Lopez-Rabson and McCloy (2013), "less than two-thirds" of Ontario college students will "complete their program within twice the prescribed program length." Moreover, student attrition rates soar a bit higher for those Ontario colleges situated in the Greater Toronto Area where rates range from 29-45% (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013). Tinto (2012) suggested that a focus on in-class retention efforts occur in such scenarios, especially in the first year of studies as a means of connecting with these students who might spend little time engaging outside of class time.

The Ontario community college sector has seen a growth in other learner populations commonly categorized as 'nontraditional.' There were more than 42,000 full-time international students that attended an Ontario community college in the 2016-2017 academic year (Colleges Ontario, 2017); this accounted for about a 45% increase from three years prior (2013), and an increase of 85% from the year 2004 (Colleges Ontario, 2014). In the same academic year, 33% of learners reported being first-generation students (students whose parents did not attend post-secondary school), 17% reported having a "physical, intellectual, mental health, or learning disability," 20% had no previous post-secondary education and did not come directly from high school, while over 30% reported being a visible minority or Aboriginal (Indigenous) learner (Colleges Ontario, 2014, p. 20). Literature has suggested these variables, among others, lend themself to lower rates of persistence (Cuseo, 2003; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; McGrath, 2010; O'Keeffe, 2013). As such, it has been asserted that institutions recognize the diversity among the

student body and employ "creative and original approaches to nurturing student engagement" as a means of fostering a sense of belonging to increase the likelihood of learner persistence to graduation (Cooper, 2009, p. 2). However, Lawrence (2005) argued that when considering the increasing level of diversity among learners, that we also look beyond "race, mature age, and international entity" or "alternative entry students" (p. 244). Scholars have suggested that our ways of thinking be extended to variables that include, but are not limited to, student motivation, commitment, flexibility, social skills, maturity, confidence, abilities to cope, prior academic achievement, communicative skills, familial support, generational and identity differences (including gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Kantanis, 2000; Lawrence, 2005).

Literature suggests the diversity, variety, and uniqueness of the college environment is what underlines "the complexity of the student profile" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 244), but that this complexity should not be viewed as a hindrance or obstacle, but rather as an opportunity for teachers to unveil the hidden curriculum to those who might not be overly familiar with the 'mainstream discourse' (Lawrence, 2005). Scholars have asserted that institutions which reflect populations that are diverse increase "the probability that students will interact with peers from different backgrounds," which, in turn, increases their openness to future "diversity experiences" and an ability to think more critically (Kuh, 2005, p. 97; Wang, 2020). It has also been asserted that student engagement is not solely the responsibility of student services practitioners, but that all members and facets of the institution play a part (Kift et al., 2010; Lawrence, 2005). Nonetheless, scholars have cautioned that the onus not solely lay on the institution, but that a reciprocal effort between the student and institution be brokered for student success and retention to occur (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012).

With that said, it is important to acknowledge that attempts to measure this type of effort and engagement between student and institution have been made. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a questionnaire administered to degree students to assess their engagement, experiences, and the accessibility of institutional resources (NSSE, n.d.-a). However, the NSSE is not without its limitations when it comes to the Ontario college sector. Only two of the 24 Ontario community colleges have participated in the survey and their involvement has not always been consistent (NSSE, n.d.-b). Furthermore, the survey is unavailable to diploma and certificate students, which leaves the NSSE results unable to demonstrate a holistic representation of the current state of engagement for Ontario college learners. Additionally, the survey's American roots have drawn criticism to the validity of particular survey questions when it comes to capturing the Canadian post-secondary context (Jones, 2007).

As the literature has reflected thus far, positive student engagement with members of the institution is theorized as being paramount for retention to occur (Astin, 1999; Kift et al., 2010; Lizzio, 2006; O'Keeffe, 2013; Penn-Edwards & Donnison 2014; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987). Therefore, the final sections of this review of literature will examine how stakeholders perceive the role and value of non-cognitive skills as it relates to post-secondary learners and their potential successes, as well as non-cognitive skill interventions in post-secondary settings.

**Stakeholder Perceptions**

Workforce transition and readiness dominate the literature surrounding soft skills and perceptions (Biss & Pichette, 2018; McKean, 2018), which, in part, could be due to the changing horizon of a workforce that increasingly calls for employees to be equipped with both 'hard' and 'soft' skills (Taylor, 2016; Weise et al., 2018). According to a recently released report by the

*Strada Institute for the future for work*, non-cognitive skills such as "creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and communication" (Weise et al., 2018, p. 7), are skills needed to ensure longevity and success in an evolving 21$^{st}$ century workforce; a job market that is predicted to become progressively automated by machines.

Fostering non-cognitive skills has become a recognized component for developing Canada's knowledge-based economy in an increasingly global labour market. Today's labour market requires individuals to occupy skills that enable them to continually learn and grow in their roles, to think critically, and to communicate effectively in ways that are socially acceptable (Borwein, 2014; Lennon, 2010). According to Stuckey and Munro (2013), lacking suitable skills to meet employer needs, or mismatches in skills where the abilities of staff members are not fully utilized is estimated to cost the province of Ontario "up to $24.3 billion in forgone GDP and $3.7 billion in provincial tax revenues annually" (p. i). Ensuring that Canadian graduates are equipped with the appropriate level of soft skills upon graduation has brought the domain of higher education, including its stakeholders, to the forefront of the soft-skills conversation.

### Students

Each year since 1998, Ontario community colleges have administered surveys to students, graduates, and employers to assess the quality of college education (Colleges Ontario, n.d.). These Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) have documented stakeholder perceptions over the past 19 plus years (Colleges Ontario, n.d.). One focal marker used to measure student satisfaction is a question that asks students to rate, on a likert scale, the statement, "*Overall, your program is giving you knowledge and skills that will be useful in your future career*" (Colleges Ontario, n.d.). A review of KPI results from academic years' 1998 – 1999 to 2016 – 2017 showed that among the 24 Ontario Colleges, students reported an average of 84% or higher as either satisfied

or very satisfied that they were receiving the knowledge and skills from their college program that will be useful for their future career (Colleges Ontario, n.d.). There was one exception in the 1998 – 1999 academic year when averages were in the mid-60 percentile (Colleges Ontario, n.d.). Yet, the vagueness of the terms *knowledge* and *skills* leave this KPI question open to interpretation and inconclusive as to whether student perceptions refer to soft skills, hard skills or a combination of both. On the other hand, in their study, in part, of student perceptions of post-secondary skills development, Biss and Pichette (2018) found that of the 6,360 students surveyed and 13 students who participated in focus groups, transferable skills, which included *problem solving/critical thinking, creative /innovative thinking, teamwork, communications (oral & written), leadership, organization/time management,* and *work ethic/personal responsibility,* were perceived as skills that were not being "developed in the classroom" at the rate necessary for success upon graduation (p. 7). Moreover, Biss and Pichette (2018) noted items like *composing emails* and *networking* as having the largest gap between the skills perceived to be needed upon graduation and the skills actually learned in the post-secondary classroom. Although the researchers categorized email composition and networking in the professional skill category, such forms of communication are also to be acknowledged as soft skills (Taylor, 2016). It should be noted that all student participants of the Biss and Pichette (2018) study were members of an organization called the Ontario's post-secondary Student Life Network. This is an online network that high school, college, and university students can join to access various resources, contests, and information (Student Life Network, n.d.).

In another study of student perceptions, it was found that of 10 recent graduates surveyed from a post-graduate Information Technology (IT) program at a university in South Africa, most perceived *multi-disciplinary thinking* and *communication* as the soft skills with the greatest

deficiency among students (Taylor, 2016). Following these two skills, were traits such as

"conflict management, client management, self confidence and self management" that were

deemed as being deficient among students (Taylor, 2016, p. 11). In terms of the most important

skills that were perceived to be needed for success in an IT work environment, *communication*,

*teamwork* and *decision-making* were cited as the top three (Taylor, 2016).

In the context of understanding soft skills as it relates directly to post-secondary successes,

a Canadian study of undergraduate students between the years 2009 and 2011 found that students

considered attributes such as "determination, focus, and drive," as well as being a hard-worker to

be among the most cited words perceived as factors for success (Stelnicki et al., 2015, p. 222).

Associated with having a lack of success included highly cited words such as stress,

procrastination, and distractions (Stelnicki et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Christofides et al. (2015)

concluded that these types of student attitudes could positively (or negatively) be influenced.

Christofides et al. (2015) examined the effect of parental expectations and peer groups on student

grades and aspirations (this included aspirations to attend and complete university). Regression

analysis was used to analyze data from The Youth in Transition Survey – Cohort A, a

longitudinal survey that captured the responses of learners aged 15-23 (Christofides et al., 2015).

They contended that having strong aspirations during high school toward a post-secondary

education not only acts as a motivator in achieving higher grades, but conversely, achieving

higher grades can affect one's aspirations. They further strengthened the link between parental

expectations and their child's decision to attend university, noting that the effect differed

between male and female students and changed through the ages. For example, it was found that

after graduating high school, females continued to be affected by their parents; however, some

were shown to have peer effects at the age of 23. Yet, since the ages of the Christofides et al.

(2015) study were limited to a maximum age of 23, understanding the possibility of attitudinal shifts in older students (through peers) is an area in need of further exploration.

In Lizzio and Wilson's (2004) Australian study, first-year university students were surveyed to determine self-perceptions of capability across groupings of different skills and traits. It was found that mature learners were more interested in developing their capability in areas that involve *interpersonal*, *self-management*, *learning and adaptability*, *conceptual and analytical thinking*, and *problem-solving* skills. Lizzio and Wilson (2004) argued that the value students place on capabilities, in turn, influences motivation to develop such skills. In essence, a student's value of skills was found to be dependent on how they perceived the skills would be relevant or contribute to their success in a future profession. Moreover, the students of this study perceived all areas of generic skills, except for *written communication,* as being more significant to the contribution of success in their future profession than in their current program of study (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004).

### *Employers*

KPI numbers from the 1998 – 1999 to 2016 – 2017 academic years have illustrated employer satisfaction of college graduate hires with rates in excess of 90% yearly, not including the 2013 – 2014 academic year when the provincial average dipped slightly to a 88.1% satisfaction rate (Colleges Ontario, n.d.). Contrary to KPI satisfaction rates, when it comes to the perceived levels of soft skills there are a number of employers from Ontario and around the world who have shared their concerns about soft-skills deficits among individuals, which includes post-secondary graduates who are attempting to enter the workforce (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010; Kember et al., 2007; Peel Halton Workforce Development Group, 2015; Taylor, 2016). According to McKean (2018), employers have begun to look at extra-curricular

activities as a means of measuring recent graduates' exposure to soft-skills development. Skills such as adaptability (an employee's ability to adapt to the office culture) have been cited as a key skill needed for job attainment and employment retention (Devadason et al., 2010; Laroche & Rutherford, 2007). Taylor's (2016) study that surveyed 12 IT companies, cited *communication (verbal and written)*, *flexibility*, and *self-management* as the most important skills needed for workforce success in the IT industry. While, employers cited *communication, conflict management and multi-disciplinary thinking* as the skills perceived to be the most deficient among students entering the IT workforce (Taylor, 2016).

### *Administrators and Faculty Members*

Studies have shown that faculty members have mixed perceptions as to the state of soft-skills development within their institutions. In a Canadian report of over 175 college and university based business school administrators and faculty members, there was a consensus that their schools "could be doing more to embed social, emotional, or human skills into the business school curricula" (McKean, 2018, p. 19). However, Taylor's (2016) study of IT faculty had a mixture of responses. Of the 11 faculty members surveyed, one perceived that their university was adequately teaching the appropriate level of soft skills to students, four were unsure, while the remaining six expressed disagreement that students were developing appropriate levels of soft skills. Faculty members noted *communication (written and verbal)* and *work ethic* as the most essential soft skills needed by students, which also coincided with the skills that faculty perceived to have the largest shortcomings among their IT students (Taylor, 2016). Three faculty members also noted *self-management* as a skill deficit among the student population (Taylor, 2016).

**Non-Cognitive Skill Intervention Programs**

There were four Canadian studies found to be published within recent years that discussed a post-secondary intervention by way of a workshop or a course designed for either the explicit purpose of teaching soft skills, or for which non-cognitive attributes were acquired as a by-product.

***Courses***

Levkoe et al. (2014) used a case study methodology to review a Service-Learning course for university graduate students called Planning for Change: Community Development in Practice. S*ervice-learning* is a pedagogical approach which seeks to merge "what appear to be separate realms of theory and practice by providing the opportunity to connect academic work and community development work" (Levkoe et al., 2014, p. 69). Over a period of eight months, the Planning for Change service-learning course examined by Levkoe et al. (2014), had students engage in a variety of activities that included: seminars with their faculty members and peers, reflections, self-evaluations, and outreach to community organizations for placement opportunities. Results showed learner outcomes to include a variety of non-cognitive attributes such as: improved communication, interpersonal, teamwork, and self-regulation skills (Levkoe et al., 2014). Levkoe et al. (2014) concluded that these critical employability skills were developed by participants as a result of the professional interactions they made in their community placements; a result of experiential learning.

Lund and Lee (2015) also used the service-learning approach to report findings from ten pre-service teachers who went through a program aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of diversity in the classroom in order to achieve cultural humility. Lund and Lee (2015) described cultural humility as a lifelong process that is reflective in nature and which aims to build greater

understanding and empathy. The study could be considered quite important to the research of soft-skills deficits in post-secondary learners, as it aimed to address a fundamental trait of emotional intelligence by seeking to look beyond one's self in order to understand others. Study participants experienced placements in communities where they were able to engage with children and youth from predominantly immigrant-families. Although some participants of the study identified with marginalized groups, the pre- and post-interviews conducted with the pre-service teacher-participants over a span of 10 weeks, highlighted that many still held assumptions, misconceptions, and limited understandings about other cultures (Lund & Lee, 2015).

The Lund and Lee (2015) study aimed to counter the deficit-model thinking; a view that approaches the values of non-dominate groups as somehow lacking (Maitra, 2015). Combating the deficit-model way of thinking was attempted through lessons learned from classroom readings, experiences in the community with children from diverse groups, and through reflective assignments. The reflective exercises and self-evaluations in both the Levkoe et al. (2014) and Lund and Lee (2015) studies seemed to have personalized the learning for study participants by accounting for their unique life experiences, which in turn, seemingly came the closest to accounting for different levels of emotional intelligence and soft skills. These two studies also took a collaborative approach by creating a course that sought community partnerships. This type of shared approach between the community and the academic domains speaks to Porter and Phelps' (2014) assertions that *integrative learning* allows for a more holistic method of skills development. It creates opportunities for learners to "make connections across time and between domains of knowledge, skills, and contexts" (Porter & Phelps, 2014, p. 58).

This was said to expand both skill competencies among learners and career possibilities upon graduation (Porter & Phelps, 2014).

Porter and Phelps (2014) did not test or implement a skill development intervention; instead they suggested modifications to the ways in which skills are attained by students at the post-secondary level by examining the success of two graduate students who integrated industry and academic scholarship in their individual journeys toward attaining a PhD. The purpose was to address the growing number of PhD graduates seeking employment outside of academia, whether by choice or not (Porter & Phelps, 2014). Porter and Phelps (2014) argued that transferable skills learned from connecting professional experiences with academic work, better-equipped PhD graduates for the ever-evolving multi-disciplinary workforce of the 21st century. They recommended a formation of institutional partnerships with various industries to provide alternate forms of student mentorship outside of faculty members; the rationale being that this would translate into support for students considering pathways outside of academia (Porter & Phelps, 2014).

The aspects of community partnerships in the *integrated learning* model discussed by Porter and Phelps (2014) provided some comparability to the two *service-learning* model examples discussed in the Levkoe et al. (2014) and the Lund and Lee (2015) studies. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the concerns noted in these two service-learning examples. Levkoe et al. (2014) and Lund and Lee (2015) recognized service-learning courses as being a huge undertaking to implement due to the required resources. This included dedicated faculty time outside of the classroom to coordinate partnerships and initiatives, as well as institutional buy-in for sustainability. However, an alternative found to be used among institutions was

workshops. Workshops were found to often be shorter in duration, self-contained within the institution, and capable of rendering skills development.

*Workshops*

The first workshop example examined the attitudes of 24 graduate students at a large-sized Canadian university. The participants in the study enrolled in one of two 20-hour Teaching Assistant workshops that were designed to equip future teachers with the appropriate communication skills for a global workforce (Dimitrov et al., 2014). Both workshops, namely, the *Teaching Assistant Training Program* (TATP) and the *Teaching in the Canadian Classroom* program (TCC), were infused with an intercultural teaching component. The TATP included "a two-hour video case study on teaching in the intercultural classroom" (Dimitrov et al., 2014, p. 92), while the TCC included the same video case study, but also examined "cultural differences in communication styles, feedback styles, and expectations for teacher and student behavior throughout the workshop" (Dimitrov, et al., 2014, p. 92). The researchers conducted qualitative interviews of the graduate students to understand the impact of teacher development programs that integrate intercultural communication strategies. Although some of the questions raised in the interviews allowed for study participants to reflect on the workshop content, the questions did not appear to account for the same depth of reflection as cited in the Levkoe et al. (2014) and Lund and Lee (2015) studies. However, results showed that graduate students who participated in the workshops were still able to gain a greater sense of awareness of their own cultural identities and assumptions. By extension, participants were able to recognize and appreciate the way in which various learners in the classrooms they taught participated in class, approached feedback, or sought help. Participants of the Dimitrov et al. (2014) study cited becoming more aware of non-verbal communications and were better equipped at brokering an appropriate use

of high-context communication in the classroom, or when more detail was required to ensure a shared understanding among students with low-context communication. The skills learned were considered transferable beyond the teaching realm, resulted in a belief of greater intercultural respect, and benefited the overall interpersonal and facilitation skills of participants (Dimitrov et al., 2014).

 **Online Workshop.** The second workshop example was the only study that addressed soft-skills deficits among online post-secondary learners. The study focused on professional skills development, with the acknowledgement that this largely encompassed a variety of soft skills. The study, conducted by Gauvreau et al. (2016) focused on graduate students who were pursuing their studies using an asynchronous online format. These learners were said to lack opportunities to hone their professional skills since Teaching Assistant positions, public speaking, and other face-to-face interactions were not normally accessible to the online learner (Gauvreau et al., 2016). The study implemented three synchronous online workshops, each designed with a purposeful goal. The first workshop promoted peer collaboration and a variety of exercises to foster "an understanding of the role critical thinking plays in both academic and workplace writing" (Gauvreau et al., 2016, p. 94). The second focused on goal-setting and particular traits seen as necessary for workplace successes such as interpersonal and networking skills, while the third workshop explored coping strategies for personal success (Gauvreau et al., 2016). Although 61 graduate students partook in the study, only ten participated in the study's focus group that resulted in two emergent themes. Firstly, it was found that synchronous workshops fostered social connections, a communal sense of belonging, camaraderie among the students, and a feeling of less isolation (Gauvreau et al., 2016). Secondly, it was found that not only did participants benefit from the development of soft and professional skills, but there was also a

realization amongst the participants as to the importance of these skills beyond the academic setting (Gauvreau et al., 2016). Social interactions, in this case online workshops where participants could engage with faculty members and peers in a synchronous fashion, were the necessary components for skill development. Nevertheless, Porter and Phelps (2014) argued against using workshops or courses for professional development or to teach generic skills, citing that there is scarcity in the available research on actual measured gains of such interventions.

**Summary**

The literature has journeyed through the historical underpinnings of non-cognitive skills and has revealed that non-cognitive skills development is best acquired within the early to adolescent years of life (Goleman, 2005); however, continual reinforcement was shown to be important for strengthening the skills already learned (Cunha & Heckman, 2007). Understanding the impact of non-cognitive skills led to the review of three influential theorists in the field of student retention.

It was shown that these theorists all pointed to social and academic engagement as predictors of student success and retention. Non-cognitive traits were also referenced by the theorists as being important to one's ability to engage with their post-secondary environment. Tinto (1987) spoke of students entering post-secondary studies lacking an appropriate level of coping skills, while Spady (1970) cited factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and responsibility as attributes needed to appropriately engage with the school community. The literature then examined a three-generational evolution of first-year transition theories that culminated into *transition pedagogy*, a theory that emphasized the necessity for all facets and members of the institution to assist in the successful transition of learners for retention to occur (Kift et al, 2010). A fourth generation, posited by scholars Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2014),

moved beyond the efforts of institutional faculty and staff by suggesting that a more collaborative effort between institutions and their local community be brokered to assist first-year students to transition to post-secondary life, engage with their institution, and to increase their likelihood of being retained.

An examination of the potential reasons why students enter higher education without the necessary skills to automatically engage with their school community followed. Literature pointed to a shift in learners who are seldom provided with opportunity to fail in high school, even when assignments are submitted late or not at all. This in turn was said to hinder a student's ability to learn skills such as resilience, coping strategies, grit, or self-advocacy; all of which are non-cognitive skills considered to be essential for post-secondary readiness. Delving into literature that addressed the changing characteristics of Ontario colleges furthered the notion of post-secondary readiness. Increases in college course delivery options, the student population, and the diversity of learner characteristics were said to be factors that heavily impact a student's ability to engage with their school, to gain a sense of belonging with their institution, and ultimately to influence their decision to remain enrolled with their college.

Literature that addressed stakeholder perceptions of soft skills was then examined. Although employers of Ontario graduates cited high satisfaction rates, when it came to soft skills, notable deficits were found. Communication (written and verbal) were perceived by employers, recent graduates, and faculty members as being among the top skills needed for success in the workforce, while also being perceived as having the greatest deficits among IT students (Taylor, 2016). On the other hand, Lizzio and Wilson's (2004) study of currently registered first-year students reported student perceptions of written communication as less important than generic skills for workforce success. Moreover, the literature revealed that faculty

members, administrators, and students all perceived that more could be done to teach soft skills in higher education (Biss & Pichette, 2018; McKean, 2018; Taylor, 2016).

The final section of literature reviewed included Canadian studies that spoke to soft-skills development through workshops or courses conducted as part of post-secondary programming. All interventions were found to target graduate students, some of whom were enrolled in a teacher education field of study or sought the opportunity to be a teaching assistant. Therefore, the learning outcomes as well as the perceptions from the participants in all four interventions, although positive, might be resultant from participant similarities as graduate students, or in the type of program they had chosen to pursue. Porter and Phelps (2014) pointed out that most interventions are only evaluated based on the perceptions of the participants engaged in the intervention, which arguably could produce an initial false-positive in success since it is measured on an initial feeling that is exclusive of any long-term effects that interventions might have on personal development, success, or actual skills retained.

**Conclusions**

The review of literature has shown that much of the research pertaining to non-cognitive skills development is focused on the early to adolescent stages of life, with fewer studies focusing on non-cognitive skill acquisition at the adult stage. The early retention theory of Spady (1970) acknowledged that non-cognitive traits such as *motivation* and *flexibility* are necessary for successful assimilation into the fabric of higher education, while more recent literature pointed to *self-efficacy*, *time management*, *self-discipline*, and *grit* as having a strong association to academic achievement and retention (Bowman et al., 2019). However, questions still remain around how proficient institutions are at creating spaces and opportunities that allow for student flexibility, motivation, self-efficacy, time management, self-discipline and grit to thrive and

develop, while also accounting for the growing diversity of their student population. Studies found that surround soft skills and perceptions primarily focused on one's ability to transition and flourish in the workplace, rather than in or with the college, its resources, and members. There were only a few studies found that looked at stakeholder perceptions as they relate to soft skills, and, the majority of those studies, primarily focused on perceived soft skills needed for a particular work industry or from a specified student group, such as Business or IT learners. Furthermore, participant samples in these studies were primarily small, outside of Canada, or pulled from an organized association where like-minded individuals are more probable. Moreover, soft-skills perceptions from post-secondary staff members, which are crucial members in the transitional process for learners, were not located in the search of literature. It is clear from the literature that soft skills are viewed as skills needed for success beyond post-secondary studies, but the perceived role these skills might play for successful engagement with post-secondary resources and ultimately retention is still in question. Notably, literature that spoke to interventions within the post-secondary setting that resulted in soft-skills development were all aimed at graduate students; a population most likely to have already proven some degree of post-secondary success by making it through their undergraduate pursuit. Importance should also be placed on addressing the undergraduate population, specifically those transitioning into post-secondary life, since they have already been shown to be at the highest risk for early departure from their studies (Finnie & Qiu, 2009; Grayson & Grayson, 2003).

As globalization continues to expand, and in turn, diversify higher education, workforces, and society as a whole, the non-cognitive skills required to persevere past life's hurdles, understand social cues, as well as interact in an appropriate manner, might be what is needed for personal, academic, and professional successes. If one were to use Tinto's (1987) model of

fostering a communal sense within the institution as a conceptual framework, then, retention initiatives that seek to insert non-cognitive skill development in them are most likely to be effective when carefully coordinated, highly purposeful, and inclusive of all members of the institution. However, before one can seek to embed non-cognitive skills into existing retention initiatives, it is first important to determine whether lacking certain non-cognitive skills would impact one's ability to engage with and benefit from institutional retention programs. Missing from the body of knowledge is a full understanding of non-cognitive skills and their relation to student experiences, development, engagement with institutional supports, and how that might impact student decision-making and retention. Once this information is explored, a clearer framework can be brokered between how current day retention programs should be designed and theorized.

The following section outlines the methodological approach for understanding this phenomenon.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter is divided into two main sections and provides a step-by-step roadmap of the method undertaken in this research study. The first section provides an overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is the research approach used to explore the perceptions of college stakeholders on the impact of non-cognitive skills on the post-secondary journey of college learners (experiences, development, engagement, and their decisions or ability to persist to graduation). The second section details how data were collected, which includes a description of the research participants, the interview instrumentation, research procedures, data analysis, data storage, and ethical review process.

**Research Method/Plan Overview**

For this research, I used an *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) research design to explore the research problem. Phenomenological research designs seek to collect qualitative data from participant groups who have all experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). Participant groups in IPA studies are usually small, ranging anywhere from one to fifteen individuals (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2004). The small size acts to avoid an over-saturation of data and to ensure participant voices are respectfully featured in the research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2003, 2004). However, it is also important to note that IPA is a research design that adapts to the topic under investigation, which, can sometimes result in greater participant numbers (Creswell, 2012; Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2004).

Participant groups in IPA research tend to be relatively homogenous, so that comparisons can be made (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). I used a less conventional approach to IPA research homogeneity, in that its similarity rests in the notion that all

participants are members of the college community; however, their roles within the college environment are what also make them distinct. In IPA research, the *how* and *what* of participant experiences related to the phenomenon are at its foci; therefore, a great amount of detail and care is given to the collection and analysis of participant stories (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Neubauer et al., 2019; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2004). Figure 2 graphically shows how stakeholder groups connect to the phenomenon being studied.

**Figure 2**

*IPA Research*
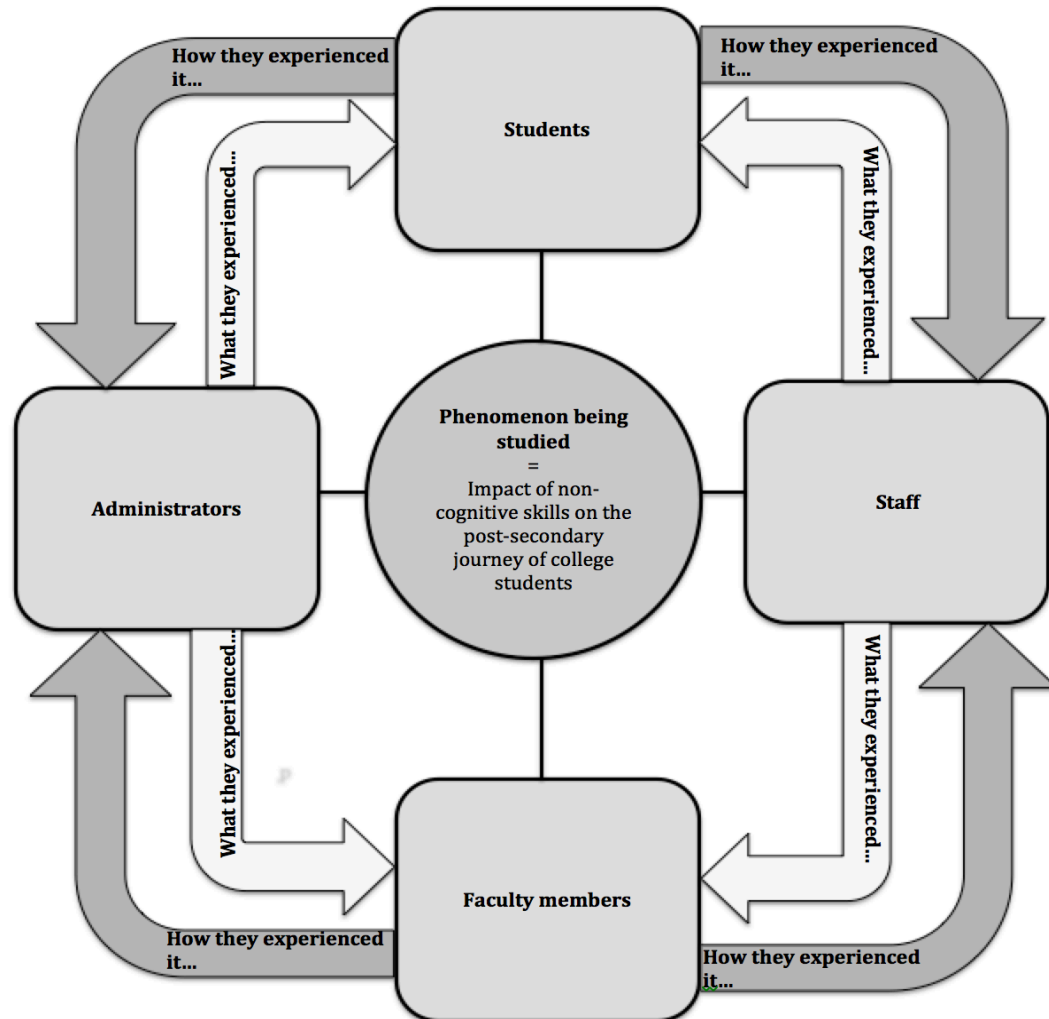


*Note.* This figure shows how stakeholders are connected to the phenomenon in this IPA study.

An IPA method is one that encompasses three distinct features, *phenomenology*, *hermeneutics*, and *idiography* (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). In *phenomenology*, the researcher is concerned with understanding the lived experiences of the participants without any preconceived notions of what they will or should say (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Moreover, there is no hypothesis to reject, rather, the questioning and data collected of participant experiences and perceptions act as an inductive process of interpreting the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Reid et al., 2005). The IPA design presumes *epoche*, a "suspension of judgement" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As a result, researchers who use this method must 'bracket' their own presumptions and biases so that the data collected sheds authentic light on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As a member of the college community who has worked closely with students in a supervisory role, and as a staff and faculty member, bracketing my biases was of utmost importance for ensuring participant voices were clearly and accurately documented in this research.

IPA research is also a method that follows two stages of *hermeneutic* analysis, similarly known as a *dual interpretation process* (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In the first hermeneutic stage of IPA, researchers are tasked with attempting to enter the sacred domain of the participants to understand their experiences and stories from the participants' point of view (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Although this would never be fully possible, it is seen as a necessary step for researchers to make sense of the participants' world and to authentically detail their perspectives. The second hermeneutic stage involves the researcher's process of interpreting and formulating meaning from the participant stories, a means to "make sense of the participants' meaning making" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). Therefore, the second stage of interpretation, to some extent, involved an interpretation of the data gathered through my own

lens of experiences as a college employee, student, mother, and any other experiences that surfaced as relevant.

The third element of IPA research is *idiography*, which refers to the study of individual cases and perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This type of analysis was critical for this research study as it was the individual participant stories and examples that provided the meaning and detail needed for understanding the phenomenon.

An IPA design suits my pragmatic worldview as pragmatic researchers are concerned with using research approaches that are best suited for understanding the phenomenon being studied. I believe that for this particular study, an IPA design was the best option for capturing the detailed personal accounts of the multiple college stakeholder groups. Capturing these detailed accounts, I believe, was critical for beginning to comprehend the many pieces of the phenomenon and to move closer to a holistic understanding; which underscores a pragmatic approach (Creswell, 2009).

To collect these multiple perspectives, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals from four stakeholder groups (students, staff, faculty members, and administrators). This was done to gain a deep understanding of their experiences as they relate to the phenomenon of non-cognitive skills and the journey of college learners (experiences, development, engagement, and ultimately their decision or ability to persist to graduation). The data gathered were analyzed to answer two overarching research questions:

1. *What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners?*

2. *How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and*

*decisions to persist to graduation)?*

The research questions stemmed from my belief that individuals view and understand items differently based on their experiences and beliefs; therefore, gathering varied perspectives was seen as being vital for acknowledging our differences and working toward a comprehensive understanding of the whole phenomenon.

**Data Collection**

***Research Participants***

Participants from two publicly funded community colleges in Ontario, Canada were sought. However, research moved forward with only one study site as access to institutional resources, such as space to conduct interviews was only provided by one of the institutions. The two initial study sites were chosen as they are considered to be among the largest community colleges in Ontario in terms of student enrolment and diversity of student body (Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, 2016/2017). As a result, the likelihood of engaging in conversations with participants who could articulate the intersections of non-cognitive skills, college learners, and learner diversity as it relates to their lived experiences was deemed to be highly probable.

It is believed that stakeholder engagement can make an impact on current and future research in purposeful ways, and, in turn, provide societal benefits (Jolibert & Wesselink, 2012). Stakeholders offer knowledge, expertise, and unique viewpoints (Boaz et al., 2018), which are necessary for understanding all angles of a phenomenon. Therefore, for this particular study, gathering insight from the learners themselves, as well as members of the community who are responsible for decision-making, the day-to-day operations of colleges, the teaching, and the support of students were sought. It is important to note that as the stories of participants in this

research study began to unfold, it became apparent that some of the participants occupied dual or multiple stakeholder roles through sequential, concurrent, or movement between roles; this insight was welcomed as it provided for a multi-perspective lens. Participants of this research study included a mixture of first-year and upper-year college students, staff, faculty members, and administrators of the Ontario College sector.

Due to the in-depth nature of analysis needed for IPA research, the number of participants for each stakeholder group was kept small (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2004). In total there were nine participants that included, three students, two staff members, two faculty members, and two administrators. According to Smith and Osborn (2004), novice researchers should ideally limit their participant numbers to no more than three. The small number of participants is to ensure that careful and detailed analysis is fostered without running the risk of becoming overwhelmed by data. However, more experienced researchers have been known to work with participant numbers ranging from one to 15 (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2004). A greater number of student participants were chosen for this research study as they represent the stakeholder group at the core of my research questions and this study.

I employed *maximal variation sampling*, which is a form of purposeful sampling that seeks to include participants who "differ on some characteristic or trait" (Creswell, 2012, p. 208). In this study, the participants sought differed in terms of their stakeholder group (students, staff, faculty members, and administrators) and may have also differed in ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender, generational identity, or other demographical characteristics. All participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. Though one's role at the college was the only demographic information used to select participants, other demographic information was gathered as part of the data collection process and later

incorporated into the findings. See Appendix A and Appendix B for interview schedules and Appendix C for the student demographic questionnaire.

### *Instrumentation*

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to collect the experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of college stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews are known to follow a flexible line of questioning that typically relate to themes in which questions can be adjusted or added as the interview direction changes or progresses (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This was invaluable for this research study and the IPA research process as it allowed for any of my biases to be further bracketed. Semi-structured interview questioning ensured that I was not asking fixed questions based on my own views, but rather it encouraged participant voices to shape the direction of the interview. Scholars have described semi-structured interviews as taking on a *conversational style* that is best used for "learning about the *motivations* behind people's choices and behaviour, their *attitudes* and *beliefs*, and the *impacts on their lives* of specific policies or events" (Raworth et al., 2012, p. 1). A semi-structured interview was deemed best suited for this research study as it allowed for participant experiences and perceptions to truly drive the research.

### *Field Notes*

Memoing was also employed in this research study to capture my interpretation and thoughts that followed each interview. Memoing is a reflexive process that can be used in qualitative research to preserve in-the-moment ideas (Birks et al., 2008). Notably, the ideas captured in the memoing process were used to later provide meaningful insight to the research (Birks et al., 2008).

### *Interview Questions*

I composed all questions used to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The questions were written in English and were designed to address the two overarching research questions. Interview questions were vetted through educational professionals (members of my dissertation committee, through the REB process) to ensure their clarity and thoroughness (See Appendix A and Appendix B for Interview Schedules). Revisions were made based on the feedback I received through the vetting process. The final number of core interview questions was determined only once suggestions and feedback from the vetting process were collected and implemented. In total, the Interview Schedule for both the '*Student'* and '*Staff, Faculty, and Administrator'* (SFA) stakeholder groups consisted of ten core questions each. Any additional questions that arose during the course of the recorded semi-structured interviews were a result of organically formed dialogue between the research participant and myself. The collection of demographic information constituted additional questions and differed between the *Student* and the *SFA* stakeholder groups.

### *Demographic Questionnaire*

Demographic questionnaires include questions that aim to gather information related to an individual's background and can be considered complex, personal, and sensitive to many individuals. As a result, it is acknowledged that researchers are to be cognizant that demographic questions posed do not ignore or generalize the potentially multifaceted identity of their participants (Hughes et al., 2016). Demographic information is often collected in research to answer the research question(s) or to be able "to accurately describe their sample" (Hughes et al., 2016, p. 138). Outlined below are the two methods used to collect demographic information,

while taking into consideration the potentially multi-faceted identity and sensitivity of the stakeholder groups who participated in this research study.

**Student Participants.** In an attempt to build rapport and trust with study participants, sensitive demographic questions were not asked as part of the recorded interview questioning. This was to ensure participants were not 'put on the spot' and could have some time to process the demographic information being asked. Instead, I created a small questionnaire for student participants to complete subsequent to the recorded interview. The participants were given the questionnaire at the end of the interview and asked to complete, where comfortable, answers to the demographic questions on the questionnaire sheet. The demographic questionnaire was only administered to student participants since the type of demographic information sought for this participant group was deemed to hold a higher level of sensitivity than the other stakeholder groups. For student participants, demographic questions related to the student's age, student status (domestic or international), enrolment status (full-time, part-time, other), college program currently enrolled in, first-generation status, number of previous post-secondary programs taken as well as the number of programs completed, and whether the student identifies with any traditionally marginalized or disadvantaged groups (Indigenous, visible minority, a person with a physical, learning, or mental exceptionality, LGBTQ member, other group not mentioned). This information was thought to be potentially vital for capturing the necessary depth and detail of student stories and experiences.

**SFA Participants.** SFA demographic questions were incorporated into the semi-structured interview questioning and related to the number of years the participant had worked in the post-secondary sector, along with the number of those years worked at a college versus a university setting. Faculty members were also asked to provide the field(s) of study for which

they have taught and, or, currently teach. As is the case with the collection of student demographic information, the demographic information collected from the SFA stakeholder groups were collected for further depth to participant stories and to determine if there were any commonalities among and between participants.

### Research Procedure

The research study was conducted through a six-stepped process.

**Step One.** Arrangements were made with the study site for the *Introduction and Invitation to Participate* in the research study to be sent out to the college community on my behalf (See Appendix D and Appendix E for Invitations to Participate in Research Study). Working in compliance with the study college's communications guidelines, the contents of the *Introduction and Invitation to Participate* in the study were posted via the study site's agreed upon modes of communication, which included an online college newsletter and two of the college's social media channels (Twitter and Facebook). Postings occurred during the month of October 2019 and specified that interested parties make contact with me via email. As a result, individuals who requested additional information or who expressed interest in participating in the research study were provided with a *Letter of Information* via email that outlined additional details surrounding the research study (See Appendix F for Email Response to Participants, and Appendix G and Appendix H for the Letters of Information). At this stage, potential participants were asked to review the *Letter of Information* and to respond to me via email if still interested in study participation. Individuals who were still interested in participating in the research study after reviewing the *Letter of Information* became a part of this study. Once acknowledgement of the participant's continued interest was received, a mutually agreed upon date, time, and location were discussed and confirmed with each participant via email.

All participants who became a part of this research were entered into the study on a first-come first-serve basis according to each stakeholder group. Those who expressed interest in participation after participant numbers had reached capacity were thanked via email for their expressed interest and informed that the number of participants needed for the study had already been reached (See Appendix I for Thank You Email).

**Step Two.** One-on-one interviews were conducted. Prior to starting each interview, participants were given a *Consent to Participate* in the research form, as well as time to review the form and to ask questions for clarification before signing it (See Appendix J and Appendix K for Consent to Participate forms). Participants were reminded that they were not obligated to participate in the study and could withdraw without repercussion. Each interview took place at the home campus of where the staff, faculty member, or administrator participant worked, or where the student attended the majority of their classes. Room locations were dependent on room availability; however, the physical space where interviews were conducted included classrooms and meeting rooms with doors that could be closed. Only the participant and myself were present during the one-on-one interviews. For participant privacy, I ensured interview rooms had blinds, drapes, or had an area that was not visible to those who might be passing by the room. However, for one interview, I had to tape chart paper on the glass door to ensure privacy was maintained.

Additionally, to reduce the chances of others making a connection between the participant and the research study, for each interview I arrived to the interview room prior to the participant. Each interview was audio-recorded using two recording devices to account for possible technical failures and to ensure interviews were captured. All recorded audio, notes, and demographic questionnaires were placed in a folder immediately upon completion of the

interview and stored in an enclosed bag that remained with me at all times until they were later locked in a filing cabinet at my home.

Interviews were conducted in one sitting and each lasted approximately 1 – 1.75 hours in duration. The optional student questionnaire was provided to student participants for completion immediately following their recorded interview. A wellness check or pause was taken for any interview that exceeded an hour. This was done to determine whether the participant needed a break or was okay to continue. Moreover, I consciously observed participant body language throughout each interview for any signs of discomfort in the line of questioning or interview process in order to continually assess whether or not to consult the participant on whether the interview should proceed, be stopped, or if there should be a break before continuing. No interview was stopped completely and at the end of each interview, participants were provided with a $25 Tim Horton's gift card as a token of appreciation for their time. Following each interview I paused between 15 - 30 minutes to reflect and write about my experience in the interview, including any items I deemed important for notation. For some interviews, additional notes were added later upon further reflection.

**Step Three.** Each audio recording was uploaded to my computer as an audio file and manually transcribed during the months of November and December 2019. Transcriptions were completed in the order each interview was conducted.

**Step Four.** The transcription of each interview was sent via email to the corresponding participant to verify its accuracy and to ensure the participant's intended message was captured (See Appendix L for Transcription Review Email). The read-receipt function was enabled when sending each email to ensure participants received their transcription. As a form of *member-checking*, participants were asked to review and return their transcription, via email, with

notations of any needed alterations within two weeks. *Member-checking* is a process in which research participants are given the opportunity to review their data to ensure its accuracy (Creswell, 2012). Participants were informed that they could request, via email, additional time should they need more than two weeks to review their transcription.

**Step Five.** Individual reminder emails were sent to each participant a week after their transcription was initially sent (See Appendix M for Transcription Review: Reminder Email). The reminder email acted as a prompt to remind participants of the deadline to review and submit any needed modifications to their interview transcription. The read-receipt function was enabled when sending each reminder email to ensure participants received the reminder. Deadline dates to return transcriptions for each participant varied according to when the transcription was completed and sent for review. Participants were also notified in the initial transcription email and in the reminder email that a non-response would be taken as an acceptance of the transcription that no changes were required. However, requests from participants to change or remove any data were honoured. This verification process was deemed as a necessary means of validating research findings (Creswell, 2012), keeping research participants informed, and respecting their position and importance in the research process (Tilley, 2016).

**Step Six.** The final step in the research procedure was the analysis of the data collected. There was a minimum of six points of contact with participants in this research process. However, additional points of contact with participants arose as a result of additional questions, clarification, or comments from participants.

**Data Analysis**

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were captured using two audio recorders and later manually transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were then sent to each participant to verify that their voice was accurately captured as a means of member-checking. Once member-checking was completed, transcriptions were reviewed so that words which could identify the college, program, or participant directly were anonymized and participant pseudonyms assigned. Transcriptions were then printed and manually reviewed for content. Data analysis followed a six-stepped process.

*Data Analysis Procedure*

**Step One.** In the first step of the review process each line of the typed transcription was numbered using a pencil. The numbering of each line was necessary for line-by-line analysis. By numbering each line, I could accurately pinpoint, note, and reference areas within each transcription based on one or a combination of lines. For example, Figure 3 illustrates how the numbering of lines can help to reference various ideas in a paragraph.

**Figure 3**

*A Few Transcription Notations After Line-By-Line Analysis*
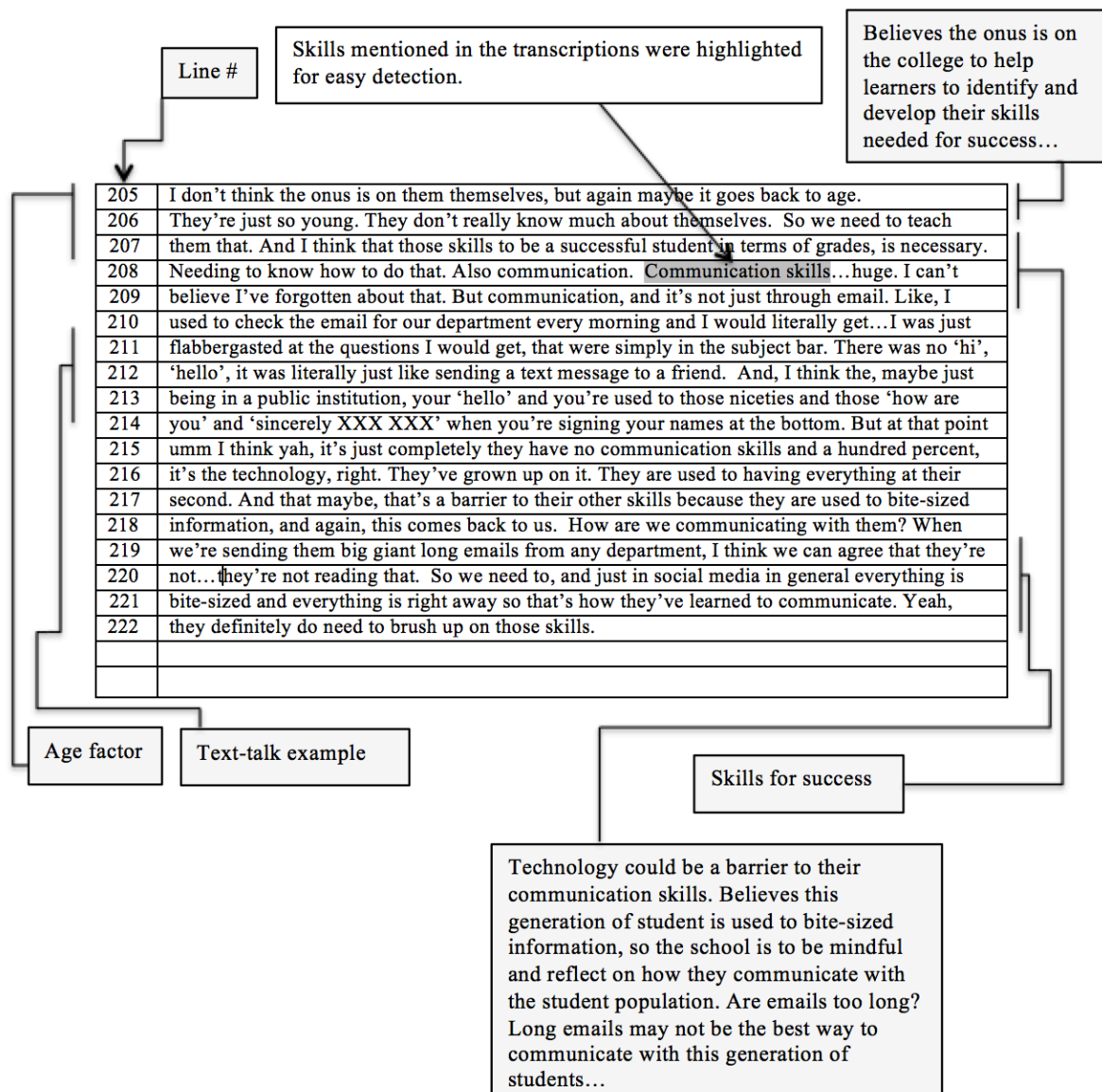


*Note.* This figure illustrates an example of how transcriptions were numbered and notations made as part of the analysis process.

**Step Two.** Each transcription was then skimmed for overall gist and then scanned for any questions that arose during the interview that were outside of the core interview questions. The questions that were captured during this step were electronically noted in participant

transcription charts. Participant transcription charts were created using the platform Microsoft Word as a means of organizing themes, data, and comments for each interview. Therefore, there were nine participant transcription charts created that housed data for each participant of this research study.

**Step Three.** Each transcription was then read in detail. During the detailed read of each transcription, I manually assigned codes by writing a word or short phrase to describe the theme or idea found. The word or short phrase was written directly on the transcription page where the idea was located. Comments were mainly written in the right-margins of each transcript with some comments stretching to the bottom of the transcription or the left-margins when space became an issue. Comments addressed important items, summarized content, as well as noted my impressions of the content read. Codes and comments were then transferred to the electronic participant transcription chart.

Codes that were created included words, short phrases, and numbers. A word or short phrase was used to describe or capture an emotion, theme, description, sentiment, or anything I felt was worth noting. Numbers were also used to identify each stakeholder group, while a capitalized first initial of the participant's pseudonym was used to identify the participant in conjunction with codes and quotations. The ability to keep track of stakeholder group and individual participants was critical in stages five and six when transcription charts were printed, clipped, sorted, and re-analyzed.

**Step Four.** At this stage participant transcription charts included, transcribed data that was approved by participants, codes, themes, my comments and, or, summary of content. Participant transcription charts were then reviewed for redundant codes and merged or re-categorized where necessary. Participant transcription charts were also reformatted to ensure that

the code, question, or theme was noted as a series of headers in the chart that were followed by a

summary, then by quotations relevant to the particular code, question, or theme. Figure 4

provides an example of the layout for the reformatted transcription chart.

**Figure 4**

*Layout of Reformatted Participant Transcription Chart*
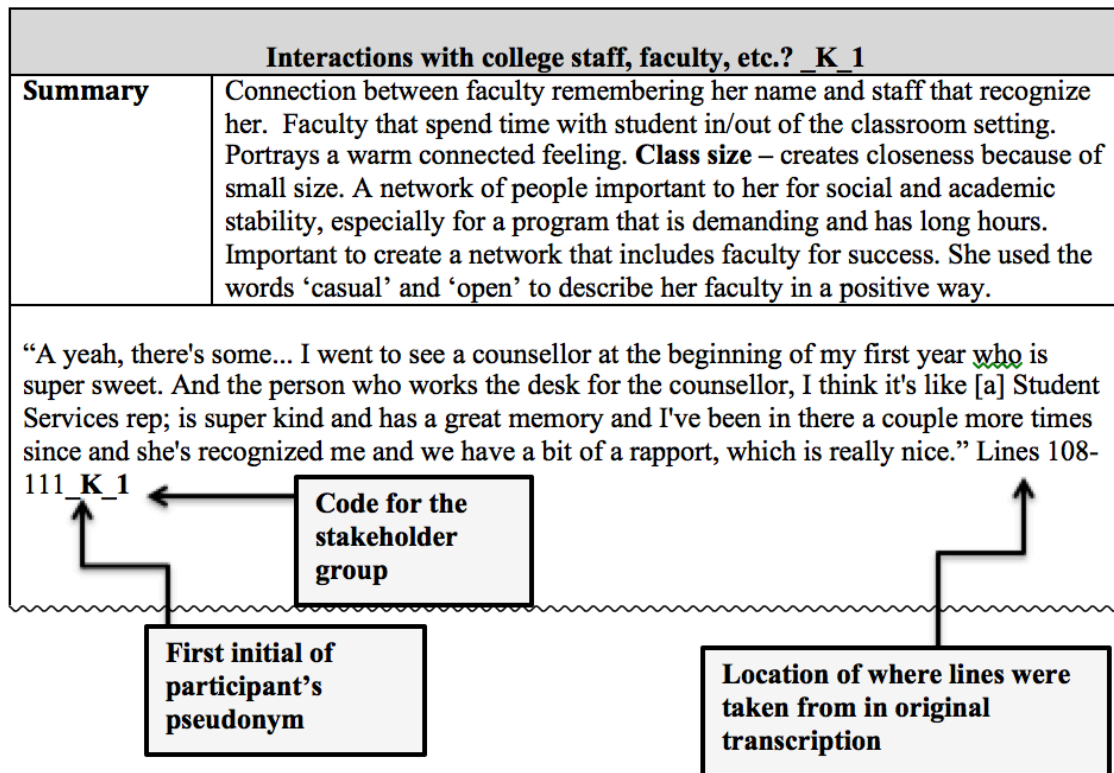


*Note.* This figure depicts an example of the reformatted layout used for transcription charts.

**Step Five.** Participant transcription charts were then printed. Scissors were used to clip

and separate each chart by coded section. The coded transcription chart clippings were then

organized and sorted into file folders labeled by the code, question, or theme used. For example,

the section noted in Figure 4 (above) would be added to the folder titled *Interactions with college*

*staff, faculty, etc.* The transcription chart clippings were sorted based on similar coded themes regardless of stakeholder group.

   **Step Six.** The content of each folder was then separated by stakeholder group and analyzed for the language used, commonalities, and anomalies within and beyond each stakeholder group. The content of each folder were reviewed numerous times before my interpretations were written into the findings. Field notes were also reviewed and used to add insight, context, and to relive the initial emotions I felt following each interview.

   Trustworthiness of the data was established through initial member-checking; the data triangulation established through the gathering of varied stakeholder voices (Reid et al., 2005), and through the detailed data analysis process described in this paper (Rodham et al., 2015). I was the only person to analyze the data, making the probability of consistent coding and interpretation of the data high. Figure 5 is a graphical depiction of the data analysis process.

**Figure 5**

*Data Analysis Process*

**Data Analysis Process**

**Steps 1 – 3** Began with the nine raw interview transcriptions. Numbered each line of transcription, reviewed the transcriptions for content, conducted line-by-line analysis, and created a participant transcription chart for each interview conducted.

```
        1        2        3

   9
                  Interview
   8            Transcriptions          4

        7        6        5
```

**Steps 4 – 5** Reviewed participant transcription charts for redundancies and formatting. Then printed, cut, and sorted chart content. Similar themes, codes, and questions were organized in the appropriately labeled folders.

```
   Themes        Codes        Questions
```

**Step 6** Findings were analyzed through my lens and reported in the findings. I looked for language used, commonalities and anomalies within and outside of stakeholder groups. Field notes were also used to add context, where appropriate, and incorporated into the findings.

```
              Findings

        Discussion of
        Findings and
        Recommendations
```

*Note*. This figure illustrates the steps taken to analyze the data collected and to report findings.

### *Data Storage*

All raw data collected, which included audio recordings, consent forms, demographic questionnaires, transcriptions, and the master list outlining all data collected were stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home and were only accessible by me (Creswell, 2013). Electronic data was stored on my personal laptop and on two recording devices (an audio recorder and a cellular phone). The laptop and cellular phone were password protected and the audio recorder was stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home. Data that could not be anonymized or de-identified, such as email communication and audio recordings were destroyed. Email communications were destroyed within one month following completion of the study, while audio recordings were destroyed once participants returned their transcriptions. The shredding of paper records and the deleting of electronic data were the methods used to destroy data. To help protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms were used and other identifying information from the transcriptions were deleted or changed in a way that still represented the intended meaning. For example, if a participant used the name of the institution where they worked or attended school, it was changed to 'study site' or 'college.'

### *Confidentiality*

Given the personal nature of this research, and, in turn, the unique stories of the participants, it is important to acknowledge that confidentiality could not be guaranteed. Participants were notified of this as part of their *Consent to Participate in Research*. Nevertheless, the following is a recap of practices that were put in place to ensure privacy and to maximize confidentiality.

1) Interviews were conducted one-on-one and only I knew the identity of the participants.

2) I arrived to the interview room prior to the participant to reduce the chances of others making a connection to the participant and the study.

3) I ensured that each interview room had blinds or drapes that could be used for privacy or had an area in the room that was not visible to those who might be passing by. There was one room where I needed to tape chart paper over the glass door to maintain privacy.

4) All data collected were stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home.

5) All identifying information was removed from interview transcriptions or anonymized.

6) Data that could not be anonymized or de-identified was destroyed.

7) Participants were all provided with an opportunity to review their transcription before the data were used to ensure they were comfortable with what they shared.

The methods used to maximize the confidentiality and privacy of study participants were articulated as part of each ethical review process undertaken for this research study.

**Ethical Review**

Approval was sought from the Research Ethics Boards (REB) at The University of Windsor (home university) and at the sought after study sites prior to commencement of the research study. The University of Windsor's Application Form for Research Ethics Review was completed and submitted along with this study's interview questions, demographic questionnaire, letters of information, consent to participate in research forms, email templates, list of soft skills, and a copy of my core research ethics training certificate (Tri-Council Policy Statement – TCPS2) on July 22, 2019. The University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board provided comments and questions in response to my ethic's application on August 26, 2019 for which I responded with revisions, clarification, and my own comments on September 10, 2019. A conditional Research Ethics clearance was then granted effective September 13, 2019 to

conduct my research study pending approval from the study colleges named in my ethics'
application.

An Ontario Community College Multi-Site form (OCCMF) was then completed and
submitted on September 22, 2019 as a means of seeking ethics approval to conduct research at
both Ontario colleges originally sought to participate in this study. The OCCMF is an application
used to initiate the approval process for conducting research at multiple community colleges
within Ontario. It is important to note that using the OCCMF is an alternative process created as
a means of streamlining "the ethics review process" by reducing the number of individual REB
applications a researcher would need to complete if seeking to conduct research at multiple
colleges (Academia Group, 2015, para. 6). Alternatively, a researcher could choose to submit
individual ethics applications to each college's REB. I submitted my OCCMF along with my
study's interview questions, demographic questionnaire, letters of information, consent to
participate in research forms, email templates, list of soft skills, and a copy of my core research
ethics training certificate (Tri-Council Policy Statement – TCPS2) on September 22, 2019 via
email to the Multi-Site Coordinator.  On October 7, 2019, I received a response asking for
clarification on the data storage process and terminology used. I returned my clarification that
very same day and received Multi-Site Ethics approval on October 8, 2019.

In the Multi-Site application process an Expert Panel convenes over the decision and
ultimately provides a letter of recommendation if the research is deemed satisfactory for moving
forward. For final approval, the letter of recommendation must then be shared with the
institutions for which the investigator plans on conducting their research to ensure that individual
institutional priorities are also taken into account. I submitted my completed OCCMF, research
ethics training certificate (Tri-Council Policy Statement – TCPS2), and the approval letter

received to the first study site's REB on October 9, 2019. However, due to a typing error in the letter received from the Multi-Site Expert Panel, I had to request a new letter on October 10, 2019. On October 11, 2019 a revised letter was issued to me and I immediately forwarded it to study site one's REB. Approval from study site one was granted to me on October 11, 2019. The Expert Panel letter of recommendation and the REB Approval letter from the first study site were submitted to the University of Windsor's REB for final clearance. REB clearance to conduct research at the first study site was granted from the University of Windsor effective October 14, 2019.

On the other hand, the second study site required that I attain institutional approval prior to submission of any documents to their REB. Therefore, the Expert Panel letter would not be taken into account until institutional priorities and resources were accounted for. The application for institutional approval was submitted via email on October 15, 2019, and on October 25, 2019 an institutional representative responded to my request indicating that the college did not have the resources at the current time to support my research. As a result, final REB approval was not sought for the second institution. In consultation with my Dissertation Supervisor, it was decided that since institutional profiles were similar, this research study would move forward using one study site.

My interpretations of the participant stories and, in turn, the research findings, are presented in chapter four.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I tell the story of how I first attempted to shed my biases, bracket my own experiences, and then provide my interpretive voice of participant perceptions to explore this study's phenomenon. Specifically, I sought to explore the perceptions that college stakeholders have on the relationship between non-cognitive skills and the college learner's institutional journey through their own lived experiences. The premise of this research study was birthed from an unflattering legacy of stagnant and high student attrition rates that are particularly prevalent in a student's first year of post-secondary life (Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Tinto, 2012).

Despite years of retention programs and spending by institutions and government agencies to retain students (Berger et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012), student attrition numbers have remained relatively the same for decades (Fisher & Engemann, 2009). Although the importance of particular non-cognitive traits such as motivation, flexibility, and self-confidence have been mentioned in earlier research as essential for successful post-secondary transition (Spady, 1970), the research surrounding non-cognitive skills and its impact on student post-secondary life has been limited. In particular, missing from the body of knowledge is a comprehensive understanding of non-cognitive skills and their relationship to the journey of post-secondary students (experiences, development, engagement with the institution, including their decision or ability to persist to graduation). Therefore, this phenomenon was a segment of education in need of exploring. As a result, the perspectives of students, staff, faculty members, and administrators were sought in this research study as these combined stakeholder groups mostly fuel the day-to-day internal college ecosystem. Furthermore, gaining an understanding through the lived

experiences of stakeholders who are intertwined within the college structure was thought to be crucial for building upon retention theory, determining next steps for retention programming, and in understanding whether or not the development of particular skills could influence the post-secondary journey of college learners.

To tell this qualitative research story, I have divided this chapter into three main sections. The first section introduces the study's research participants by providing background information, while the subsequent two sections present the study's findings as they correspond to the following two research questions:

1. *What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners?*

2. *How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and decisions to persist to graduation)?*

Findings of this research study are presented below using a combination of dialogic and numeric approaches to aid in clarity and to expose patterns found in participant responses. Although the quantification of participant responses are not generalizable, my choice to disseminate participant responses in this way was to showcase the commonalities and differences found among participants within and across stakeholder groups of this research study. Moreover, quantifying responses provided opportunity to visually capture word repetition, which highlighted patterns and outliers within participant responses that allowed for deeper analytical consideration and dissection. It is also important to note that the analysis of participant stories, specifically of staff, faculty members, and administrators, is grounded in the deep-rooted experiences they brought to this research. Their comments are supported by several years of

work with thousands of adult learners, with some participants dedicating decades to research and committee work in the field of higher education.

**Research Participants**

The data gathered included a total of nine participant stories: three students, two staff members, two faculty members, and two administrators. Each story held a unique perspective, built context around the potential impact of non-cognitive skills on the journey of college learners, and illustrated the importance of multiple viewpoints in this research. Pseudonyms, inspired by Marvel Comic Superheroes, were randomly assigned to each participant to help preserve anonymity. Subdivided by stakeholder group, but in no particular order, I present the participants of this research study in a chart (Table 1) and in written format below.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Information*

**Stakeholder Group:** Students

| Pseudonym | Gender and groups identifies with | Student status | Age range | Current year of study | Type of credential pursuing | First post-secondary program? If no, how many programs enrolled in, including your current program? | Completed previous program(s) enrolled in and earned credential? | Type of institution previously attended (college, university, other) | Total # of years of post-secondary experience (**not including current year**) | College service scenarios identified with |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kamala (S1) | Female, LGBTQ | Domestic, Full-Time | 18-24 years | 2nd | Degree (4 year) | No, 2 | No | University | 2 years | Has accessed counselling support and health services |
| Rachel (S2) | Female, none specified | Domestic, Full-Time | 18-24 years | 4th | Degree (4 year) | No, 2 | No | College | 5 years | Has accessed advising support |
| Sharon (S3) | Female, LGBTQ, Accessible needs | Domestic, Full-Time | 18-24 years | 1st | Diploma (2 year) | No, 2 | No | University | 2.5 years | Prefers not to answer |

| Pseudonym | Specific Stakeholder Group | Years working in post-secondary institution | Experience working in university setting | General category of program area taught | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (Mental health) | | | | | | |
| **Stakeholder Group:** Staff, Faculty, Administrators | | | | | | | |
| Carol (Stf1) | Staff | >10 | Did not disclose | N/A | | | |
| Wanda (Stf2) | Staff | >10 | Yes | N/A | | | |
| Nina (F1) | Faculty | >10 | Did not disclose | Business or Commerce | | | |
| Tessa (F2) | Faculty | >10 | Did not disclose | Humanities & Social Sciences | | | |
| Adam (A1) | Administrator | <5 | Did not disclose | N/A | | | |
| Laura (A2) | Administrator | 5<10 | Did not disclose | N/A | | | |

## First Round of Questions – Demographic/Icebreaker

The first round of questions were meant to get to know each participant, their role at the college, and how their role has shaped their interactions with other college community members (students, staff, faculty, administrators). It was important for me to provide a detailed account of participant stories to highlight them as individuals so that a holistic understanding of their responses, including the possible rationale for their perceptions, could be revealed. A total of two main questions were asked of each participant during this round. Participants in the *student* stakeholder group received a different set of questions from those in the *staff*, *faculty*, and *administrator* stakeholder groups. Student demographic information was also retrieved from the optional Student Demographic Questionnaire. Table 2 outlines the first round questions that were asked of each stakeholder group.

| **Table 2** |
| :--- |
| *First Round of Questions – Demographic/Icebreaker* |
| **Staff, Faculty, and Administrators** |
| 1. Can you tell me a bit about your current role at the college and any other roles you've held in a post-secondary environment? <br><br> 2. How have these roles shaped the way you interact with students? |
| **Students** |
| 1. Can you tell me what it is like to be a student? <br><br> 2. Is college life how you thought it would be? |

### *Students*

There were three student participants in this research study: Kamala, Rachel, and Sharon. All three participants identified as domestic students, between the ages of 18-24 years, studying either in a college diploma or degree program. Sharon was the only first-year student interviewed.

**Kamala [S1].** Kamala is a second year degree student whose strong voice became evident within seconds of meeting her. She identified as female, a member of the LGBTQ community, and as a person who loves artistic expression. Visibly confident, Kamala spoke with conviction about who she is and what she wants in life. Early in our conversation, she explained that she "always liked being a student," and by the end of our dialogue, I could tell she had a keen sense of certainty toward her future career path.

At the time of the interview, Kamala was about two months into her third year of post-secondary life. After completing high school, she took a year off, or as she phrased, a *gap year*, to work and volunteer internationally before starting her first experience of higher education where she sought a university degree in the languages. However, Kamala quickly realized that a

degree in the languages was not what she was truly passionate about as she craved a program

that she said was more "artistically expressive." After only a year at her hometown university,

Kamala moved to Ontario to pursue her creative dream.

Kamala spoke about her current program as a dream she realized was worth pursuing

through the motivation and encouragement of people she described as very significant. She

explained, "particularly [her program], I always thought of as a hobby and didn't really consider

it as a career choice until I spoke to some really important people in my life who figured that it

was worth a try."

However, she shared with me that college life turned out to be far different from what she

thought it would and could be. College life turned out to be starkly different from the large

classrooms and student siloes she had experienced in university. Kamala explained,

> I didn't anticipate the level of like closeness with just like the other students, like as
>
> friends. And even as just like people that I'm working with. 'Cause a lot of, even like my
>
> experience at university, but even specifically thinking of college you know you think of
>
> not really speaking to the people in your classes and just being there for yourself, going
>
> home and doing your thing.

The small town feeling, close-knit program, small classroom sizes, and sense of

community that she encountered in the college setting had been far from what she expected; yet,

had influenced the type of interactions she had with college staff, faculty members, and her

peers. She explained,

> I went to see a counsellor at the beginning of my first year, who is super sweet. And the
>
> person who works the desk for the counsellor, I think it's like [a] Student Services rep; is

super kind and has a great memory and I've been in there a couple more times since and she's recognized me and we have a bit of a rapport, which is really nice.

Kamala discussed how having a school network became important for her sense of belonging, feeling of support, and sense of motivation toward program completion. She revealed,

It's really important to have that network and it's really important that the faculty also feels a part of it because I think it would be really hard if they were to keep themselves super professional and not really interact with us as much other then just as a professor. I think that the level of interaction and almost casualness that the teachers have is really instrumental in making us feel like we're getting somewhere.

Kamala's comparison of "level of interaction" and "casualness" displayed by her professors to her feelings of progress and sense of belonging stood out as a depiction of, or cry for faculty members to be at eye-level, to be seen more as colleagues rather than in a hierarchical platform so that connections can be more easily formed.

Throughout our discussion it became apparent that Kamala was passionate about continually working and building upon her craft and honing her skills. Her involvement and engagement with the college were noticeable as she emphasized the importance of confidence in her interactions within the school community throughout our conversation. She explained:

Like I've been to, yeah, concerts and certain events just on my own, which I know is something that a lot of people wouldn't be comfortable with. But, I have a sense of confidence that allows me to do that and just getting out of the house is huge.

She also credits having a gap year to reflect and then experience university life as what helped her to build that confidence and many of the other soft skills we discussed during our meeting. She noted, "I think for me a lot of these [soft skills] developed through taking a gap

73

year, having to figure out my own wants and needs and goals. Kind of forces you to develop these." It was striking to me how her story revealed the role *necessity* played for her in developing soft skills and the role she believes it could play for others in their development.

**Rachel [S2].** Rachel is a student who works on-campus and is in her fourth and final year of a degree program in the human services field of study. But her journey to that point was not easy, nor was it a straight or clear path. Rachel, who identifies as female, described her college experience as being, at first, "very overwhelming and kind of like scary," however, she attributed the college environment, small class sizes, and the meaningful relationships that she built with members of the college community as being pivotal for her in finding comfort and a guided path through the institution. When speaking of her professors, she explained, "the teachers, like professors, were very welcoming and able to kind of like guide me through." She described her interactions with her professors as "very social," which has allowed her a level of comfort when asking questions and seeking clarification.

Rachel shared how fortunate she felt to have an opportunity to complete a degree program at her community college, an environment that she now felt comfortable within. It appeared to me that having the ability to complete a degree at the college level was an ideal situation for Rachel, as she explained, "My, my family has always been in the *university, university, university,* right. So, they've always like pushed me to the university section;" a journey she perceived to be "very [hard] like competition-wise to get into." Although familial influence pushed Rachel toward the university setting and earning a degree, she saw the idea of a university as somehow harder to achieve. Rachel said her marks, the expense to commute to school, and the cost of tuition were the determining factors as to why she felt university would not be the path for her. She explained,

Okay like my overall mark can actually like go into college more and looking into the college programs and university programs that if they do offer the same programs, the college is a lot cheaper. And the university was like double or triple the amount, and they're farther than where I live. So it would require for me to go a little bit further or stay in Rez, which costs more.

The ability to earn a degree at the college and her rationale of costs provided her with a way to quell her family's push for a university education.

At the time of the interview, Rachel was in her second program and had begun her sixth straight year of college enrolment. She first enrolled in a three-year diploma program in the technology field before realizing in her second-year that the curriculum had moved in a direction that was away from her interests. Rachel explained, "It was just like draining for me, and I wasn't focused enough that I was able to continue and finish it." It was the professors in her first program that she attributed to being pivotal in her reflective process and, ultimately, her decision to change programs. She mentioned,

Some of the teachers were telling us that, yeah, they're professors now, but before they became teachers in [the college], they had to work in a company where they basically didn't have any social life. And then that kind of like made me realize that, oh like, I'm stepping into this program and then kind of giving up my social life and personal life afterwards. I think that was kind of one of the main things that kind of set me back and made the decision to switch into a different program.

Rachel was happy that she could stay in a familiar environment and still seek to achieve a degree. She explained,

75

So yeah, I think I know that I made a great decision, 'cause like even if [pause] when I dropped out I still chose [the same college]. I never like went and looked for another school. I just went like directly to [the college] because I already knew the school. I already knew what pretty much a [college] life is, so I didn't want to go into another college or university and kind of like start all over again.

Rachel knew what was expected of her as a college student, which made her feel at ease. It was clear to me that Rachel was someone who loved her school. Her story revealed the importance of self-reflection, asking questions, and how it empowered her in her decision-making and desire to be involved with her school.

**Sharon [S3].** Sharon, who identifies as female and as a member of the LGBTQ community, was admittedly introverted. Her introversion became evident from her personal stories, her soft-spoken voice, and apologetic nature whenever she believed her response had lacked depth. At one point in our conversation, she paused and said, "Umm…I mean, I feel like those are the main two. I really can't think of anything, I'm sorry." To capture her soft-spoken voice, I found myself having to move my recording devices closer to her a couple of times during our interview. However, as the interview continued, she became more comfortable, and I saw her confidence grow along with the depth and detail of her responses.

At the time of the interview Sharon was mid-way through the second month of her new diploma program at the college. Her enrolment at the college had been her second experience in higher education. Sharon had previously attended university; however, she withdrew after starting her third year. She explained, "Two and a half years in. I finished my second year and then the start of the third year I was like… n'umm…it's not for me." Sharon then took a two-year break from post-secondary life where she engaged in opportunities to travel and meet new

people. Her encounters away from school appeared to help her to develop a sense of purpose and to shape the type of person she wanted to become. According to Sharon,

> I traveled a bit, and so I kind of was meeting other travellers, similar age, similar stories. You know, went to school, then left. Or finished school or didn't finish school. And they, just talking with them, it was just kind of those conversations. They were just like, *you know, this is what I'm going through. This is what I did*. And I just kind of bounced ideas off of them and we ended up here.

Nonetheless, pressure from her parents "to do something," along with her unwavering desire for independence, which she largely equated to moving out, ultimately fuelled her desire to return to school. Sharon never said or came across as overly passionate for her college program, as she let me know that when looking for a program to enroll in, she wanted a program that "didn't seem too daunting." However, she did articulate that she enjoys the program, has been "looking for placements for [the] second year," and could visualize herself working in her chosen field of study. She explained, "I can, which is very difficult for me to like do, but like visualize. Like I can see myself in the workplace."

Sharon disclosed to me the pressure she feels to complete her program and to enter the workforce. However, she acknowledged that her desire to leave home and start her life path has manifested in a tremendous amount of self-inflicted pressure. She asserted, "That's my own pressure. Just to pay off student loans and to get out of the house to start a life. Yeah."

When asked about what it was like to be a student, she noted that her experiences were far from the envisioned cinematic fantasy. She explained,

Because I assumed it would be like the movies when I was younger. But, it's good. It's nice. I don't think of it, it doesn't feel like college. I don't know why. It just kind of feels like high school, but more. You have more responsibility.

The small and close-knit environment ("high school" feel) that she experienced at the college thus far had bolstered her ability to be more open with others and herself. Sharon spoke of her new outlook and behaviour at the college and how it had differed from her past university experience by asserting, "It's a complete 180." She added, "Like I'm very proactive in the classroom. Like I'm more interested in the topics that we're like learning about." Sharon noted that she only interacts with her instructors inside the classroom; however, that she found the relationships built to be friendlier, yet still professional. She explained,

So, it's very, not like a buddy buddy thing, but like, there's a respect. Like they know that we're adults. Some of us [are] even similar in age to them so there's like a respect. Kind of like they want us to succeed and they're going to do like whatever they can to. So, it like opens us up. 'Cause I'm a very like introverted, shy, like insecure person, so when I see that they're looking like, you know, if you mess up it's fine, don't worry, we'll be here for you. We're here for you to like make mistakes and then help you not make mistakes anymore. So, it's kind of like easier to interact with them as opposed to a professor that hides behind office hours and like doesn't know anyone's name.

The faculty's ability to incorporate real-life experiences in the classroom, their friendly and caring demeanour has allowed Sharon to be open to learning from her mistakes and to approaching faculty for help, which was something she had struggled with in the past. I felt comforted by Sharon's seemingly genuine nature, openness, and honesty about her past struggles, including her past battles with mental health. She came across to me as someone who urgently

wanted to explore opportunities to push further out of her shell. She showed me how truly strong she is; however, through our interactions, I could tell she was not giving herself the credit she deserves. After all, it took many of the skills we discussed during our conversation, such as confidence and motivation, to come forward to give a voice to research.

*Staff*

There were two college staff participants in this research study, Carol and Wanda. Carol and Wanda, both work as student services practitioners, regularly interact with students, and have worked in the post-secondary environment for over a decade.

**Carol [Stf1].** Carol is an advisor at the college who works with learners in areas related to their academic, social, financial, and overall well-being. She interacts with students every day via phone, email, and in-person. She has over thirty years of experience working in the education field, most of those years working within the private and public Canadian college sectors. Her roles in the college setting have included advising and teaching life skills to adult learners. Prior to her current role, she held advisor positions that specifically targeted non-traditional learners such as those who were re-careering, internationally trained, or newly paroled from prison. However, before working in the post-secondary system, Carol worked with adolescent learners, "as an Elementary Junior High School teacher." She explained that "it was a time and place in [the province] where there wasn't a lot of full-time work and so I was working on call, like a teacher on-call it's called." While *on-call,* Carol also operated, what she described as, "a too successful business" where she "worked within the school system and was getting referrals from the school for people that needed tutoring." The "too successful" part of her statement, I believe, was meant to emphasize the overwhelming number of hours she needed to devote to her business while also tending to her young children at that time. She explained,

It became overwhelming, and I had a young family, and I was just working too much. So I sold my business and looked for something where I could be home when my kids were at home instead of [pause] I was working all night and weekends when my children were home.

Carol moved on to teach life skills to adult learners and then was employed full-time as an advisor, where she became extremely passionate about the work. When talking about her role as an advisor, she explained, "And then I got in there and then I loved it and thought oh, this is where I should have been all along. So it's kind of a movement from teaching to transitioning, to just being a full-on advisor." Her love for advising also translated into a position she held, at one time, as the coordinator of a provincially funded advising program.

She described her current advising role as one that often entails "listening to students' circumstances, trying to give them information about expectations from the college experience [and] what that's going to look like, or it should look like." She believes there is a level of intuition that comes with her advising role. The interactions she has with students goes far beyond verbal communication as she commented on how critical reading student body language plays in her uncovering underlying issues that a student might not necessarily present forthright. Carol explained,

I believe that the interactions come, like I said, intuitive and knowing your stuff really well. I think when we see new advisors come in they are panic-stricken because they can't do it all, and you can't at first. A lot of it comes from experience and from knowing that when somebody says this, this is what they mean. And that if they've done this, this is going to be an underlying consequence two years from now. And so it's a bit of understanding all those things.

Through our conversation, I found Carol's stories about her interactions with students, to some extent, have always focused on learner skill development, whether purposeful or unintentional, overtly or covertly. Her gift of storytelling provided me with many examples while keeping me laughing and intrigued by her wealth of life experiences. For example, her humour can be highlighted with a story she shared of how self-advocacy is a beneficial skill. She explained,

> My phone bill came in the other day, and they had taken away my free loyalty of $95 a month and all of a sudden my bill went up, and my husband's attitude was to throw the bill on the counter and call them a thousand names and stomp out of the house. And mine was, well, I'm going to call them up and ask why they got rid of that and what I can do. So I called them up, and they actually gave me an even better deal. So it's that self-advocacy to see if you learn it here, you're going to carry that right through everything in life. So in the divorce proceedings, I think I'm going to be better off than him. [Laughter]

Her life stories began to reveal to me why particular soft skills were emphasized during our discussion.

**Wanda [Stf2].** Wanda is a student services professional that has been working in the post-secondary environment on and off for approximately 13 years. She started working in the college environment as a teenager while completing her college credential. Although most of Wanda's work experience has been in the college sector, she also spoke vividly about a role she held when completing her graduate degree as a teaching assistant at her university. She explained, "when I did my Master's, for about a year and a half, I was a TA during that time."

Wanda's many roles in the college sector included positions that ranged from being front line staff to roles in research and in the planning and execution of various student services

programming. As a result of these roles, Wanda has had many interactions with students over the years, interactions she attributes to supporting her development of patience, curiosity, and empathy. Wanda explained, "I think as, as I've gone through the years, I've become a lot more patient in many ways with students and then I think on the opposite end of the spectrum you find those pet peeves with students." She went on to add,

> I think I've especially over the last little while as we see scholars like Brené Brown kind of come to fruition with her whole empathy building, I've really taken a look and stopped the critical lens and started to build more empathy and really a more curious lens. Tell me more, you want to hear about their stories because I find that every student has a different story [pause] and a lot of that unravelling and those pieces generally can lend to a better understanding of the situation they're in, rather than just sleeping in and not going to class [pause] or something that we associate with college students more.

In her practice, she acknowledges that each student is unique and comes to the institution with a personal story. She tries to understand learner behaviour without rushing to judgement or making "the student uncomfortable." What I found most intriguing about Wanda's interview was her self-reflectiveness and ability to develop patience in her adult years, which, in part, she attributed to literature she read from American researcher, Brené Brown (Brown, n.d.). Wanda had a willingness to share with me how her mindset and attitude had shifted over time through her experiences and interactions with others. The story of her shift in mindset prompted me to take a powerful pause to reflect on it, which later aided in my analysis of soft-skills development in adult learners.

*Administrators*

The administrators in this study are connected to the Ontario college system in multiple ways, as former students and as current employees. At the time of the interview, Laura worked as an administrative assistant, while Adam managed a department that employs both staff and students.

**Adam [A1].** Adam revealed that he previously managed his own company before entering the post-secondary workforce. He is relatively new to the college sector, as he revealed that he was hired a little less than five years before our interview. In his work, Adam leads a small staff of individuals who hire, mentor, and work with students from various programs. As a result, he interacts quite regularly with students at the college and will even "run into them in the hallway [or] what have you."

Students who work in Adam's department are in a work-integrated learning environment and are expected to perform duties that relate to their field of study. However, to help preserve Adam's anonymity, the details of the department he manages and the work they do within that department will be kept to a minimum. Nevertheless, it is important to note that within Adam's time at the college, he has noticed significant changes in the skills of students who apply (and are eventually hired) to work within his department. He explained that the "student hire changes drastically with each term." Adam's rationale for the continual transformation of student employees will be elaborated upon as the findings are further revealed in this chapter.

Adam provided a unique perspective as a former college student, previous business owner, and current administrator who works closely with the student population, which, in turn, offered insight into how particular non-cognitive skills impact student life, the work environment, productivity, safety, and progression in a workforce and school environment.

**Laura [A2].** Laura, who has worked at the college for a little over five years, provided a perspective to our conversation that I would describe as multi-relational to the college. Laura is a parent of a student currently attending the college; she is also an alumnus of the college, and now works as a college administrator. Although she has less than ten years of college work experience, her work as an administrator spans decades; as she explained, "My whole life has been all about administration." During our conversation, Laura showed unwavering gratitude toward the college. She credited the school with the foundational skills that have helped in her life successes and for hiring her at a stage in her career that she felt would be hard to find employment in her field. She noted, "because I'm in a different age demographic too, it was difficult. A lot of people are looking for admins with five years experience or whatever, ten years; but I've had decades." Her invested interest in contributing to the betterment of the institution extended beyond a desire for her child's quality education as she showed passion and empathy for all students when discussing their needs. For example, Laura's administrative duties do not always allow her time to interact with students; however, words like "thrills me" and "love" were used to describe these student interactions when she does. She explained the joy she receives during the start of each term when she is able to interact with learners, mostly in the hallways. She began by saying,

> And at start of term, we all wear our [department] clothing so that we are easily recognizable. And what I found was when I wear this around campus at start of term you get people approaching you, and you get students who are lost.

She went on to say,

The brand new first-year ones, they're the best. I love that they're lost and then you can direct them, and then they feel good and then you know it gives them that little, the lift like oh now I'm starting to feel integrated.

During our conversation, Laura pointed out gaps she, her child, and her child's classmates have encountered in the college system that she felt could be mended to help student experiences. She also shared ideas of how best to bridge these gaps, which is why I believe Laura was so open and generous with her insight for this research. Her willingness to participate in the study, to me, reflected her desire to give back to the institution she referred to as home.

*Faculty*

The faculty member participants of this study each have more than ten years of working experience in the college sector, are actively involved at the institution, and advise students as part of their faculty duties.

**Nina [F1].** Nina is a faculty member who has worked at the college for close to two decades. After leaving the private sector from a profession she described "was always about dealing with people and sort of understanding them a little bit more," she spent her first five years at the college working "as a part-time faculty member," until she became full-time. During her time at the college she has worked on several committees, program development projects, and has held various academic advisory roles in addition to her teaching positions.

Nina described her interactions and relationships with members of the college community as "a really strong relationship with students and with faculty." Her experience over the years and interactions with others has shaped her classroom practice to what it is today. Experience has taught her that student actions in the classroom do not always boil down to their motivation. Instead, students may interpret the information they receive in the classroom differently. She

explained, "it's their brain; the way that they process it. It's not that they're trying to be difficult; it's just that they haven't heard, and it hasn't registered in there." She went on to discuss her classroom management technique as a deliberate process and how adding humour to the classroom is an ingredient for student engagement and connection. Nina explained,

> And I work my way around the room very intentionally and make sure that they're on task. And I joke around with them all the time. I'm like, if I come around and you're doing [another class's] homework I'm going to throw your computer out.

The connections she makes in the classroom was notable as our dialogue with one another progressed to a discussion about the importance of these bonds in fostering success and motivation for students. Our extensive conversation of soft skills made it clear to me that it was a topic of real passion for her. Her adamancy that the development of soft skills in college is necessary for the development of the whole person is why she informally discusses the importance of these skills with her students. Her wealth of experience working with students left me refreshed with examples of where soft skills have impacted learner experiences, their engagement, development and decision-making process, which will be revealed as this chapter progresses.

**Tessa [F2].** There was a particular genuineness that radiated from Tessa as we spoke. I had to take an appreciative pause several times when reviewing her transcribed interview so that I could take in the many self-taught initiatives she talked about incorporating in her teaching practice. Tessa is a faculty member who has over ten years of experience working in the college sector. Her roles have included teaching, advising, and supervising students. Her life experiences had taught her to recognize the privilege, power, and influence that comes with her faculty position, which she made explicitly clear when she explained,

I recognize because I'm called a professor, I have a level of power within the classroom in the sense that I'm giving you your marks. But how I'm making the classroom equitable enough that people feel comfortable enough to be able to articulate and bring their voice forward to the process of learning.

Tessa was quite reflective and shared with me that no matter how small, she takes her role and the time that she has in people's lives seriously. She noted, "this job is not dull," and she ensures that she continues to seek professional development to keep pace with the growing needs of her students. Throughout our conversation, Tessa repeatedly shared stories and pedagogical practices used to ensure that her classroom is equitable and that the interactions with her students are meaningful. Her interactions with students are daily, and she illustrated the role of faculty members as one that is "able to critique in a constructive and positive way that does not diminish the personal goals that students may have." I took this as the first statement in which she shared with me her adamant belief in the importance of effective communication.

I thought it important to include the following quote from Tessa, as it captures how insightful and potentially impactful faculty members could be to understanding and connecting with their learners. Tessa explained,

I think our population here at [campus name] is unique in the sense that, at least in my classes, I have a lot of international students and it's students from a dominant culture; South Asian culture. And so even within that I have to learn about more about the South Asian culture so that I have a level of understanding. So not only when they communicate I can understand some cultural practices, some ideas and scopes like which might be foreign to me. So I have to have the willingness to learn so that I can reach my students. And I think that also comes in with areas, I mean it's not a part of your question, but

when we think about power dynamics and the influence that can happen within a classroom.

Tessa came across as someone who did not take the potential impact she could have on others for granted. She made an important distinction that "every semester, every class, every class is different," making it clear of the importance to adjust with each class and not assume learner homogeneity from group to group. Tessa does joke around with her students to build rapport but also expects professionalism. She has taught classes on soft skills and expressed how fortunate she felt that she could witness firsthand its "direct relevance to the everyday lives of students." What I took from our discussion was her profound ability to reflect on her own practice and how her actions and words in the classroom can have a profound impact on others for the rest of their lives. When speaking about her faculty role, she noted, "I can never take it for granted because I think there's so much more to it. I'm not working with empty chairs; I'm working with people." She went on to say, "And I don't take that lightly," which was evident from the directedness of her words and the tone of her voice.

**Second Round of Questions: General Discussion of Skill Levels, Value, Role**

The second round of questioning sought to explore the perceived level, value, and role of soft skills in today's college learners. This round of questioning sought to investigate **Research Question One**, which asked: **What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners?**

To answer research question one, the following two questions were explored:

1.  Do you believe there are particular skills students need to achieve success at the college?
2.  Can you discuss whether you feel today's student population are lacking any skills?

The results of these questions are presented in thematic fashion below.

***Student Success and Skills Students Need to Achieve Success at the College***

All participants named a variety of skills they believed to be important for achieving learner success. However, it is essential to note that when this question was asked of participants, they were not requested to specify soft skills, but rather, to discuss any skill(s) that came to mind. Furthermore, participants were asked to define their perception of *student success* before discussing whether they believed there to be particular skills learners would need to achieve such success at the college. Understanding how a person defines student success was thought to aid in understanding why a person might perceive particular types of skills to be needed for achieving such success.

**Student Success.** Ideas discussed around the notion of student success included two perceived characteristics. First, that student success is an entity that is uniquely distinct for each learner. Second, a learner's success ought to be viewed and tackled as a shared responsibility between the learner and their institution. Furthermore, four ideas, I will call them, areas of perception, of what constitutes student success emerged. Figure 6 illustrates a breakdown of the participants' perceived characteristics of student success as well as their perception of what student success entails.

**Figure 6**

*Defining Student Success*
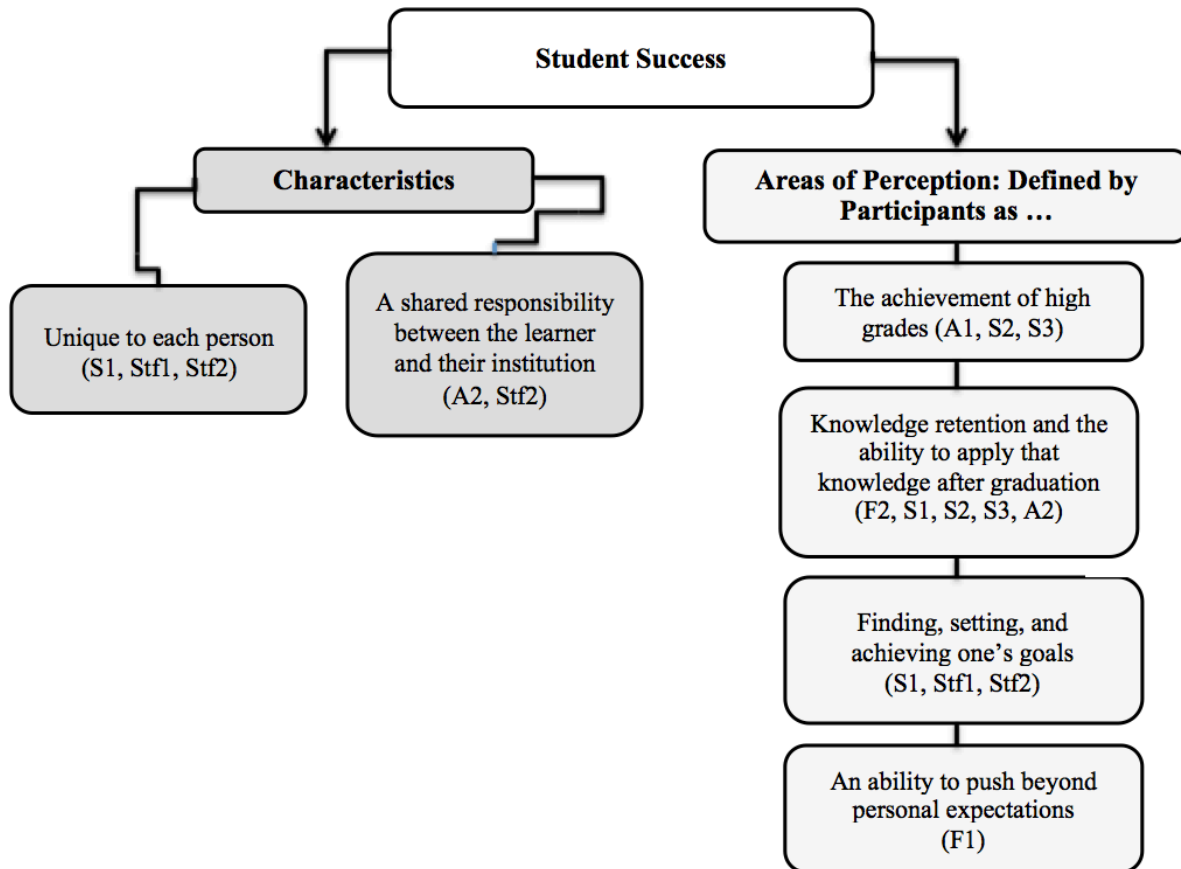


*Note.* This figure illustrates the characteristics and factors participants used to define student success.

***Uniquely Distinct.*** Three participants shared their belief that student success is uniquely distinct for each learner. Carol (Stf1) was adamant in her words when discussing how she always tries to remain cognizant of success distinction in her advising practice. She explained,

So if I'm advising you how to get a 4.0 to get out of here and that's not your goal, I'm not

tailoring my advising to what you need….I always catch myself for doing this but I still

do it, when I get a student who's a 4.0 or complaining that they have an 83 on their exam and they feel that that is not right and they want to appeal that grade, and my feeling is '*oh for God's sake just take the grade and move along,*' to remember that….my vision of success is not theirs. So, so that is how I define success. (Carol, Stf1)

Acknowledgement of success distinction among learners appeared to be the only way that Carol (Stf1) believed she could understand and appropriately advise each learner toward their goals and not toward any of her preconceived ideas of success. Important to note that the 4.0 in the context she described equates to the highest grade point average at the institution. A student achieving a 4.0 holds an 'A' average.

Wanda (Stf2) also expressed the importance of treating student success as "different for every single student," but furthered the idea of learner success to include, for example, a student's desire to leave their college. Although acknowledging that withdrawal from school is not traditionally viewed as an action deemed successful, she asserted that,

> I think sometimes, and although rare, if a student is withdrawing and going to a different institution, that could be their success. I think it's defining their career path and following that career path, which is, with as much gusto and motivation and ambition. (Wanda, Stf2)

Wanda's (Stf2) view showed that voluntary withdrawal should not always be deemed as negative, but rather it could result in greater opportunity, depending on the learner's ultimate life goals or their goal for that moment in time. In essence, success is the achievement of a sought after goal.

Student participant, Kamala (S1), also fortified Carol (Stf1) and Wanda's (Stf2) resolute around success distinction by noting, "success is personal, and your version of success has to be

different than other peoples" (Kamala, S1). Kamala's (S1) emphasis on success having "to be different," for each learner spoke to the necessity for each student to create their own story, their own version of success based on their needs, wants, and abilities. For example,

> There are certain guys that have never danced a step in their life, who know that that's not where their success has to be and like they can focus on places that they know they'll be able to take into their careers. (Kamala, S1)

> In this example, Kamala (S1) had discussed peers she observed struggle through

components of their program that were not a part of their academic strong suit or even something they enjoyed. However, getting through the dance component for these "certain guys" so they could focus on more enjoyable areas of their program was an example of success that she believed should not be downplayed.

> ***Shared Responsibility.*** Wanda (Stf2) and Laura (A1) expressed their belief that student

success should be seen as a shared responsibility between the learner and their institution. The varying levels of motivation, maturity, and goals among college learners was a focal point to why Wanda (Stf2) believed that the college must play a critical role in building a sense of community, helping learners to explore their capabilities and foster academic, personal, and career possibilities, no matter the goal. She stated,

> And I mean you're not going to get every student that's ambitious or motivated, but I think if we can build on that and we can build on providing them a sense of connection and a sense of purpose and helping them discover their purpose and then providing them with the tools and resources in order to fulfill their purpose, regardless of what that is, I think that's success. And I think that's success part on the institution as well. Because

you can't have a student be successful, and vice versa, if we're not. So we need to be

successful and it's a collaborative effort. (Wanda, Stf2)

Wanda (Stf2) expressed the idea of success as a reciprocal process that is dependent on

and intertwined between the student and their institution. Laura (A2) echoed this notion of

cultivating a shared effort between the learner and their school to foster successful outcomes.

She made her point by sharing a story of a first-year student who encountered an institutional

error at the beginning of her college journey by receiving an inaccurate timetable. Laura (A2)

explained,

The problem was her timetable got completely messed up and they were not able to fix it.

The Program Advisor said your classes have changed and so it's fine, go to those classes.

Here's your new schedule. She went to the classes; they didn't have her on the roster.

The learner was subsequently unable to cope with the peripheral challenges that resulted

from the college's mistake. In this example, although the student was provided with a correct list

of classes, adverse social effects were resulting from the student's record not being accurately

updated in the college system. Laura (A2) went on to explain,

And, so the teacher said, *who are you?* You know, *what are you doing here?* And, *you're*

*in the wrong class*. She goes, *no I'm in the right class.* It took weeks to sort that out.  So

she didn't feel anchored. She didn't feel a part of that class because she felt she was in

limbo.

The word 'anchored' used to describe how the student felt illustrated Laura's (A2) belief

in the importance of connecting with one's institution and the dual responsibility between the

learner and their school in manifesting personal successes. Laura (A2) went on to reveal that the

student in this example eventually withdrew from the college. She believed the withdrawal was

due to a combination of the student lacking coping skills, along with the institution's inability to connect with the student and create a sense of belonging. Laura (A2) expressed,

> So part of that was on us because we failed her. And I've heard this before. These kids come, just the scheduling and knowing where they're going and being in this and that. It takes a toll on them because they don't feel that they are settled now.

When the institution failed to connect with the student by helping to socially transition her into college processes, practices, and norms, it, in turn, hindered the creation of a sense of community that likely led to adverse outcomes.

In addition to the characteristics noted, four themes emerged from participant definitions of student success. The themes included *the achievement of high grades*; *finding, setting and achieving goals*; *knowledge retention, applying that knowledge after graduation*; and *the ability to push past personal expectations*.

**High Grades.** Participants acknowledged the achievement of high grades as a key determiner of student success. Adam (A1) noted, "Well obviously the benchmark is looking at a student's mark." Suggesting that grades act as a marker of achievement in our traditional social sphere. Attaining a particular mark will result in a particular grade point average, which, in turn, will automatically rank a learner in a good academic standing or not. However, Adam (A1) went on to say, "but that's just the overall measurement of understanding." He alluded to success as ultimately being greater than solely grades. As our conversation unfolded, Adam (A1) discussed the idea of social integration as an indicator of success, which will be presented later in this chapter.

Students, Sharon (S3) and Rachel (S2), also saw high grades as an indicator of success due to its parallel with the successful completion of courses. Sharon (S3) explained, "In part, it's

good grades because you have to pass." While Rachel (S2) indicated, "success would be just doing great in your courses and kind of like succeeding [in] that and aiming to graduate in the future, or furthering your knowledge like later on in life." Sharon (S3) and Rachel's (S2) definitions of student success also translated beyond college life and were interpreted as significantly more valued than high grades. For example, Sharon (S3) also expressed that student success includes the ability to retain knowledge, while Rachel (S2) also added the ability to effectively communicate her needs to others, especially her instructors, as an important element to achieving student success.

*Knowledge.* Sharon (S3) explained that the retention of coursework knowledge and applying that knowledge after graduation as a focal point to her definition of student success. She articulated,

> You can cheat and you can, you know, study and forget everything and get like nineties, but at the end of the day if you're not retaining what you're learning and then using it successfully after you've left the school; that's student success because then you're not successful in what you're studying to become. (Sharon, S3)

Knowledge retention was especially important for Sharon (S3), as she mentioned a few times throughout our conversation that a primary goal for her is to graduate and find employment in her field so that she could develop the independence needed to move out of her parents' home. She tied the ability to apply the knowledge she acquires from her program to finding, maintaining, and succeeding at a job in her chosen field.

Rachel (S2) also discussed success as an ability to use the knowledge gained from school in multiple settings within and beyond the school environment. She explained,

If you're succeeding in your courses, if you're pretty much communicating with your

teachers, and kind of like following through with all of your assignments. Like that's

already a success, 'cause you're taking like that one step forward to kind of like

communicate with your teachers in trying to see what you can do to better yourself in the

future. (Rachel, S2)

The ability to effectively communicate one's needs to their professor was an achievement

of success that Rachel (S2) saw as transferable beyond the classroom and into professional

settings.

***Finding, Setting, and Achieving Personal Goals.*** Kamala (S1) also discussed the ability

for students to communicate their needs to faculty members as part of student success; however,

she attributed this to having confidence, motivation, and a strong understanding of one's

personal needs to attain success. Kamala (S1) revealed,

And I also think that's important for having your own drive and your own motivation for

your own version of success. 'Cause there are some people who'll need to ask certain

questions to get to where they want to be, and other people have to ask totally different

ones. And so, having the confidence in what you need from the class to be able to go up

and ask about it is really important and hard to attain, I would say.

According to Kamala (S1), student success is less about attaining good grades and more

"based on what we want out of the program," further acknowledging student success to be very

personal and unique to the individual learner. Carol (Stf1) explained that "success is when you

have achieved what you set out to achieve to a level that makes you content," demonstrating that

success is measureable only on a personal level. She went on to note her experiences with

students whose sole goal was to achieve "that 4.0 to graduate." Specifically, the personal goal for

these students would be to earn the highest possible grade point average upon graduation even though a grade level that high was not needed to advance. For other students, as Carol (Stf1) explained, "success is to get the heck out of dodge with a piece of paper that will give them a job." In other words, future employability is the primary motivating force and the determiner of success for these students. The concept of success as the ability to find, set, and achieve one's personal goals was further fortified through Wanda's (Stf2) assertion that students need to "discover their purpose, regardless of what that is," and Kamala's (S1) explanation that "you have to set your own goals and think of those as your successes rather then just saying, well I want 80% in all of my classes." These statements expanded upon the idea that discovering one's purpose and following through with it gives cause to grow the term student success to one that should be preceded with a word denoting the 'personal' nature of the concept; *personal student success*.

***Ability to Push Past Personal Expectations*.** Nina (F1) shared with me that she believes all students are capable of success; however, she defined successful students as those who reach beyond their expectations and achieve something outside of what they ever thought they were capable of. When discussing what she perceives as a successful student in her classroom, she explained, "I think doing things outside of your [pause] above your expectations; that's what I'm looking to see. Whether it's academically, or whether it's socially, or whether it's an interaction. That, to me, is a definition of success of a student" (Nina, F1).

Nina's (F1) belief that all students are capable of pushing beyond their personal expectations suggested that all learners can develop their skill levels further.

**Skills for Success.** As mentioned earlier, all participants discussed particular skills they felt are necessary for achieving their version of student success. Of the skills mentioned,

*independence* (44.4%), *resilience* (33.3%), *written communication* (44.4%), *oral communication* (33.3%), *teamwork* (33.3%), and *work ethic/personal responsibility* (33.3%), were among the most frequently cited. Notably, both faculty members declared *open-mindedness and a willingness to learn or access resources*, *problem solving/critical thinking*, and *written communication* as skills needed for success, while both staff members mentioned *resilience*. Figure 7 illustrates the types of skills or traits participants perceived as being necessary for student success, while Table 3 segments participant responses by the stakeholder group. This is followed by the themes captured and the skills elaborated upon by participants.

**Figure 7**

*Skills or Traits for Success*

## Skills or Traits Thought to be Needed for Success
### N=9

| Skill or Trait | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Ability to find Balance | 11.1% |
| Ability to take Initiative | 11.1% |
| Adaptability | 11.1% |
| Conflict Management | 11.1% |
| Coping Skills | 11.1% |
| Creativity/Innovation Skills | 11.1% |
| Flexibility | 11.1% |
| Indpendence | **Most frequently mentioned by participants 44.4%** |
| Leadership | 11.1% |
| Maturity | 11.1% |
| Motivation | 11.1% |
| Open-Mindedness/To Learn/Access Resources | 22.2% |
| Oral Communication | 33.3% |
| Organizational Skills | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | 22.2% |
| Resilience | 33.3% |
| Self-Awareness/Self-Reflection | 11.1% |
| Teamwork | 33.3% |
| Time Management | 11.1% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | 33.3% |
| Written Communication | **Most frequently mentioned by participants (44.4%)** |

*Note*. This figure displays the skills or traits participants cited are needed for student success to be achieved.

**Table 3**

*Skills or Traits Needed for Student Success*

| Skills/Traits | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to find Balance | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Ability to take Initiative | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Adaptability | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Conflict Management | | ✓ | | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Coping Skills | | | | ✓ | | | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Creativity/Innovation Skills | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Flexibility | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Independence | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | 4 |
| | 66.7% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 0% | | **44.4%** |
| Leadership | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Maturity | ✓ | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Motivation | | ✓ | | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Open-Mindedness/Willingness to Learn or Access Resources | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | **100%** | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Oral Communication | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |
| Organizational Skills | | | | ✓ | | | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | **100%** | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Resilience | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Self-Awareness/ Self- | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reflection | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | 11.1% |
| Teamwork | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | 33.3% |
| Time Management | | | | ✓ | | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | 11.1% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | 3 |
| | 66.7% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | 33.3% |
| Written Communication | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | **100%** | | 50% | **44.4%** |

*Independence.* According to Wanda (Stf2), students need the ability to be autonomous, which, in turn, necessitates learners also to possess organization and time management skills to accomplish their independence or self-directedness. Wanda (Stf2) explained,

> Going back to that organizational piece, their time-management skills just go from zero to needing to be a hundred, and it's a lack of preparedness that you know, they've done that. They are thrust into a huge institution, lots of students, and don't get me wrong at [the college] the class sizes are you know manageable in terms of them not being 1500 students in a lecture hall like you would [at a large university], but there's still a level of [pause] and maybe it is autonomy, but I don't know where you would start to build that. It's lacking though, it's definitely lacking.

> Wanda (Stf2) noted how entering post-secondary life, especially when coming directly from high school, can be a shock for many learners in terms of the level and type of skills they feel are needed for success and those that are required. The shock for students stem from the lack of preparation they received prior to entry into post-secondary life.

Students, Rachel (S2) and Sharon (S3), also declared independence as a necessary skill for student success. Rachel (S2) explained that achieving student success would require the ability to be and work independently. She noted that,

You can only rely on yourself. So that independent work lifestyle I guess you could say is like one of the skills that you could possibly, like you could have to be successful. Because without [it], if you're just relying on somebody like all the time, that's technically not your success; it's both of your success. (Rachel, S2)

Rachel's (S2) rationale for declaring independence as a necessary skill for success appeared to originate from the idea that student success is, in some ways, a personal journey that requires a level of individuality.

Sharon (S3) also touted independence, along with motivation, being a hard-worker, conflict management, communication and resilience as important skills needed to achieve student success. However, these skills were also seen as elements necessary for successes beyond post-secondary settings. Sharon (S3) spoke of these skills as components for relationship building, workplace and life successes, as well as aiding in overall well-being. She explained,

This is what they preach about in the workplace even. It's just in life in general, to have successful relationships, to have a successful career, you know, in whatever. Just being able to communicate, be independent, be able to [pause] like conflict management, like resilience, being able to, you know, work through things. Like, you're the perfect candidate for any job if you have any of these. (Sharon, S3)

The ability to work through adversity and deal with novel challenges, also known as resilience, was said to be a crucial skill required in meeting the challenges of post-secondary life. Notably, both staff participants were adamant about the necessity of resilience for learner and overall life successes.

**Resilience.** Wanda (Stf2) discussed *resilience* as a skill students could utilize to potentially spear through, manoeuvre around, or completely smash the barriers hindering their

success. Wanda (Stf2) highlighted that the underbelly of resilience is largely tied to an ability to cope and compose oneself when faced with challenges. She explained,

> I think resiliency has a lot do with not just being successful, but just being okay when you're not in control of things. And maybe that's what it is. And, do I think it's a huge issue? Possibly, I mean anything that's interfering as a barrier to their academic success is that. (Wanda, Stf2)

Her explanation painted a picture of 'culture shock' and an inability to cope with an educational environment that may present quite differently from elementary and secondary settings that new students might be used to. The type of culture shock experienced when entering the college sector without the ability to cope, thrive, or bounce back from a not-so-ideal situation was said to impact not only student success but also the confidence and future trajectory of educational paths.

Carol (Stf1) discussed resilience as an ability to bounce. She explained, "you bounce because life is going to throw you against a wall a couple of times, and you're either going to go splat or you're going to bounce off and keep going" (Carol, Stf1). Carol's (Stf1) view of bouncing was described as a visceral response to overcoming adverse situations. However, Carol (Stf1) also asserted that not all students have this instinctual ability to bounce back or move beyond failure. In her experience working with students she found that an initial experience of disappointment or failure could result in the student self-questioning their confidence, program, and future as a learner. When coaching students through 'failure,' Carol's (Stf1) approach to communicating with students was found to be both entrenched in reality and filled with thought inducing questions meant to get students thinking critically and rationally about their possible next steps. She explained that for some students she can say, "So all right that happened, now

what do you do to move forward?" (Carol, Stf1). Then, work with the student to rebuild and map out next steps toward success and beyond the failure experienced. However, she also explained that,

> For some people, that happened, so now I cannot move forward, I cannot graduate, I can't take any other courses, my confidence is damaged, I feel that this is the wrong program for me because I failed an exam, I failed the course. (Carol, Stf1)

> Carol (Stf1) articulated that there is a divide between students largely based on skill

levels. Some can rationalize, problem-solve, and find their way through or around a problem compared to those who cannot.

*Communication.* Communication was mentioned as one of the top skills needed to achieve student success by both the faculty members, one student, and one administrator. Faculty member Nina saw communication as a skill that is particularly needed for student success in programs involving plenty of interaction with other people. She explained, "Communication, a hundred percent….sort of that emotional intelligence. Like understanding of different personalities and being able to adapt to that" (Nina, F1). In her teaching practice, she incorporates, "Tony Wagner's seven survival skills" for which she quickly rhymed off to me:

> So off the top of my head, I hope I get them right, agility and adaptability, accessing and analyzing information, creativity and innovation, initiative and entrepreneurship, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, and leadership. So those to me are, like there's lots of different elements in those seven things, but if you can demonstrate progress and development in those areas beyond what you thought you were capable of, then that's success. (Nina, F1)

Nina (F1) spoke of the need for learners to be emotionally intelligent so that they are able to understand others and adapt accordingly when particular situations warrant it.

Tessa (F2) also demonstrated for me how communication would be important for success in the program that she teaches. Her emphasis was on written communication since her program requires a substantial amount of essay writing from students. Tessa (F2) explained,

> I mean you need to know how to write an essay. If you can't write an essay then you're really going to have a hard time. And knowing how to do that appropriately with APA formatting and so forth because if you don't do things properly, well then we as professors make the assumption that you are copying and there's other dynamics that are involved.

Tessa (F2) saw effective written communication and even appropriate referencing as a basic skill that is non-negotiable for learners of her program. For her, written communication requires proper formatting, grammar, and the emotional intelligence to produce effective word expression. However, all participants did not view the importance of written communication in the same way.

Carol (Stf1) shared her belief that technological progress has, or will, eliminate the necessity for people, including learners, to spell words correctly or to write in a grammatically correct fashion. She explained, "I believe in this day and age you can dictate that, and you can format it anyway you want" (Carol, Stf1). However, her view was not always this way. Carol (Stf1) credited years of observing a decline in the value placed upon 'proper grammar' and the rationale given to her from a younger colleague to changing her mind. She recalled, "I taught spelling as such an important skill, and how to write paragraphs. I taught for seven years how to write an effective paragraph, and I just don't see that anymore, and I just don't think anybody

cares" (Carol, Stf1). Her younger influential colleague had brought the idea of a generational

shift to her attention. She recounted his words by saying, "like he's like *the people who are now*

*20, by the time they're 35, everybody else is going to be willing to accept that*" (Carol, Stf1). She

further demonstrated her point by sharing a personal example. She explained,

> One of my sons' is, the one with all the learning disabilities and difficulties, is now a
>
> manager with employees and says *I don't care. I don't care what he writes to me so long*
>
> *as he's telling me what's going on. I don't care if he can spell it or do it or whatever, so*
>
> *long as I know what's happening.* (Carol, Stf1)

Carol's (Stf1) point, that the next generation views and performs written communication

in very different ways and, as such, will continue to change the way we communicate with one

another and will eventually phase out the notion of 'proper' grammar and place more focus on

the core meaning of what is being communicated.

Conversely, administrator Laura (A2) labelled communication as, "the biggest thing."

She spoke extensively about her daughter, her daughter's friends, and her observations of them in

their ability, or lack thereof, to self-advocate and relay their needs to staff and faculty members

on-campus without appropriate written and oral communication skills. She described student

situations that demonstrated how communication is the main vessel to many critical aspects of

student life, such as making friends, communicating with faculty, seeking help, and ordering

food on-campus. She articulated to me how lacking communication, in turn, can affect a person's

level of confidence. Laura (A2) suggested,

> A lot of them who are struggling are like this [*Laura demonstrates*], they got a pen in the
>
> hand, or they're looking up at the screen, and there's text on there, and they're not able to
>
> clearly communicate what it is that they want. I hear that with our own co-ops at the front

desk. They can't get out what they want to say, and what they're trying to say, but they just can't extract the words. And, so part of that I think rolls over into their confidence about voicing their opinions. (Laura, A2)

An ability to voice opinions and self-advocate for oneself was seen to be an important aspect of student life and for accessing the necessary resources for success. This was said to be especially necessary for learners with disabilities who may need to work with their faculty members to ensure they can access and utilize their accommodations.

Both faculty participants in this study recognized the stigma learners with disabilities often feel when asking for help or when disclosing a desire to utilize their academic accommodations. Nonetheless, Tessa (F2) expressed how the ability to communicate and access resources to meet a learner's needs is necessary for achieving equity. She explained,

> I think you have to be willing to access resources that are available to you. Whether it be the tutoring office, the librarian, or even our student counselling services that we provide. Sometimes students come with a background of a prior IEP, Individualized Educational Plan that they have when they were in high school or even primary school and so forth. And they feel that they don't need to use it. And I don't think the idea is that there's, I guess sometimes we have a negative stigma associated with the need to ask for help and I don't know where that comes from. A lot of that could be culturally based and it might be even deeper than me looking at the student that I have in front of me. But I think because of those factors sometimes students do themselves a disservice to not access it and then when they realized they should have, it might be too late. And so to me, use the resources that are available even [pause] and choose as you progress, whether or not you want to

use it or not. But utilize what you got and recognize that it's not, like you're not at a disadvantage; you're just at an equitable standpoint. (Tessa, F2)

According to Tessa (F2), utilizing one's academic accommodations should be viewed without stigma and no different from any other resource offered at the institution as resources provide equitable platforms, reduce barriers, and bolster student success.

As a faculty member of both diploma and degree students at the college level, Nina (F1) shared her observation of the number of students with academic accommodations in her classroom. She explained, "I'm finding that actually, I have more in the degree program than I do in the diploma" (Nina, F1). Anecdotally, she noted her belief that learners in the degree program are more prone to self-advocate, "because maybe they went to University, failed out and then tried to figure out why and [it could be] they didn't get an accommodation initially when they were at University, and now they're learning from that experience." (Nina, F1)

Nina (F1) echoed sentiments about the need for learners to utilize the resources available for them and how vital effective communication and self-advocacy is in voicing need and maximizing success.

As discussions continued, participants began drawing connections and illustrating how closely connected and interrelated many of these skills are, and how they work in conjunction with one another.

**Teamwork.** Adam (A1) spoke extensively about the importance of social skills and working as a team. Adam (A1) noted teamwork as being especially critical in programs and industries where collegial interactions and communication can result in critical (life or death) situations. He explained,

Our industry….there's a huge social dynamic to it. So if you can't work as part of [a]

team, you essentially can't work in the industry. So, that social component is truly, has to

be fostered here. And we do constantly put them together in teams. We do constantly

have them work [pause] in different roles. So sometimes they're the head of the snake,

sometimes they're the tail. But that is just real life in our industry….So you need to be

able to transition, have that understanding of where you fit into the chain, and you need to

behave accordingly. And yeah, sometimes you get to run the show, but sometimes it's

someone else's show and you need to know when not to step outside of your rung. And

that's not something that is easily taught; you just have to sort of live it. (Adam, A1)

From the student perspective, Kamala (S1) added that,

Teamwork and like, being willing to be supportive of your teammates, I guess for lack of

a better word, is really important and I think that that's something that my year in

particular shares a lot of, which is super conducive to all of our successes.

Kamala (S1) revealed that her program is particularly competitive and that entering it

with an ability to work with others, foster personal responsibility, and demonstrate a level of

maturity is what will lead to success. She attributed her maturity and ability to adjust where

necessary as stemming from the 'gap year' she took immediately following high school. Further

findings on the notion of a 'gap year' and skill building will be discussed later in this chapter.

**_Motivation and Mindset._** The discussion surrounding a learner's motivation and mindset

was raised as often being a determiner to a student's level of success. Tessa (F2) noted, "I think

you have to have a mindset that you're ready to learn." She discussed the often complex life

situations that students come to school with and noted that there are "things that are happening in

their personal life that might have an impact that they're not at that stage where they are ready to

be in school" (Tessa, F2). As a result, she stressed the importance of student self-reflection when considering program choices and their studies' timing to optimize successful outcomes. She explained,

> I think also they need to be reflective enough at a point where they can actually admit, at times, that this might not be the best program for them. Sometimes students don't want to hear that and I think it's not just [pause] they're paying money and so forth, but it's the idea like, do you really want to gain what this program has to offer? And if you're not in a position of wanting to do that, then you should go where you'd be better. Where it would be a better fit. So, I think open-mindedness. I think you have to be reflective. (Tessa, F2)

Tessa's (F2) statement provided an important window into the thought process of learners, from a faculty perspective. Her explanation highlighted the realities of items that cross the minds of learners in their self-reflective process when pursuing their studies. What I gathered from this is that learners would often consider the time and money needed to complete or postpone their credential, as well as the type of credential to pursue. Or, at least from Tessa's (F2) faculty perspective, they should be.

Faculty member Nina (F1) also talked about student life situations that often spill into the classroom and the emotional impact it can have on both the student and the instructor. She started by saying, "I had this one student last semester. Oh God it was heartbreaking" (Nina, F1), and I could tell it was a student situation that was weighing heavily on her mind. She added, "step dad basically has kicked him out….and he had until November 1st to find a new place to live" (Nina, F1). It was the reason why the student had not been to class, "he's been trying to work so that he can save enough money to get an apartment on his own" (Nina, F1). Her experiences as a faculty member have highlighted that "Those are all the things that are going on

in their lives that you aren't necessarily aware of" (Nina, F1). This underscored that each learner is unique and has motivations that can be shifted by their life circumstances.

Sharon (S3) asserted her belief that motivation is needed as it fuels student success. She added further to the various types of motivations learners have by explaining,

> I want to say you have to have some kind of motivation. Whether it's money or to get out
> of the house, or to buy a house, or whatever your motivation is to support your family if
> you have kids. You just have to have some kind of motivation because if you're doing it
> to just do it, I feel like people are just going to go through the motions and that's what
> leads to like you're just doing it to get the grade, to leave, and then you don't retain
> anything. (Sharon, S3)

As I considered both Tessa (F2) and Sharon's (S3) view, I note that different learners may choose to pursue a program for a variety of reasons, one of which could be solely based on a belief that a particular program will render the most monetary gain or prestige for them in the future.

As discussions continued, a reoccurring theme began to manifest around the role of social circles in fostering student success and overall personal well-being. My interpretation of participant stories revealed that the ability to form supportive social circles in learning environments requires a combination of skills and skill levels to form, foster, and maintain personal relationships within the social sphere.

**Social Circles.** Sharon (S3) spoke of how surrounding herself with positive people has mentally helped to motivate her and has kept her on track with school. As someone who has struggled with mental health in the past, she has found comfort, support, and a sense of

belonging in a type of environment where she has experienced stressors in the past. She explained how beneficial social circles are for her in an educational environment by saying,

> You tell yourself you're going to succeed, and they believe you're going to succeed, and then you will succeed. Just telling yourself that and being in an environment where people are just constantly being like, *Yes. This is good, this is great*. You know*, continue doing this, you know you're going to get better*. It's just constantly uplifting you. And for me, specifically for me, like that was important to have that kind of support system. (Sharon, S3)

Nina (F1) fortified Sharon's perspective of the impact of social circles on student well-being and, ultimately, success, from a faculty perspective, by sharing with me an observation she made between two students in her classroom. She talked about one student as being quite isolated in class and described him as "meek and mild," while describing the other as a "big brawny guy" who is out-going. Nina (F1) talked about how supported and included the student she described as "meek and mild" felt when, following a presentation, "the kind of big brawny guy went up to him and told him how much he enjoyed his presentation and how he did a really good job, and you could tell that he really worked hard and tried" (Nina, F1). She illustrated how a simple social interaction can both uplift and motivate others. She further explained,

> So I went up to him after and I said, 'that was such a great thing that you did to this guy because I'm sure he really struggles finding a group. Finding a group to do a group project with, finding a study group. And what you did, because you're kind of a leader in terms of getting people to follow you.' Like he really is very charismatic. 'You just elevated his social status in this class.' (Nina, F1)

These social interactions were noted as important for gaining a sense of belonging to the school community and, in turn, a successful transition to college life. Adam (A1) explained,

> So the social aspect, I think still is really key in order to sort of fit within your peers or fit within at least a body of your peers. It's not that you have to be liked by the entire student body, but you certainly have to feel that you have a pocket that you're part of. And it doesn't have to be a very big pocket. But you do have a need to feel that you have support in what you're doing and that there's a small section that you can go to that sort of understands you and feels what you are doing is important.

Adam's (A1) words draw close similarities to Sharon's (S3) perception of social circles as supportive entities meant to lift you up through encouragement and acknowledgement of successes, no matter the size or magnitude of the accomplishment. The idea of social circles emerged as an important component to the achievement of community and a sense of belonging within the institution. Participants portrayed the social circle as an area of support that brings a student closer to the institution through a membership of people who act to motivate one another and who often share lived experiences. These lived experiences might even act to further fuel their support for one another.

Attending social events was shown to be an important aspect of college life, to integration into the college community, and to building social connections early. However, Laura (A2) explained that students like her daughter, who are shy or who live off-campus, have fewer opportunities to connect with others. Laura (A2) explained,

> And I think too, that's the other thing for first-year students, if you're not living in residence, the opportunities to mingle with your classmates are marginal. They're very

limited. There's not a whole lot done for the students to help them integrate, and that's the tough part. I've heard that story a lot too, that they feel lost; they don't know anybody.

Similar to Nina's (F1) story of her two students' interaction in the classroom where the 'meek and mild' student was not socially connected to others in his classroom, Laura (A2) went on to address how personality traits impact opportunity for connection building. She used her daughter as an example as she explained, "My daughter, you know for the ones who are shy, you know trying to pick out the ones in the classroom that could be your friend, you know, they have to suss that out themselves" (Laura, A2). She illustrated how having particular personality traits, such as being shy, could result in fewer opportunities to connect with others. Laura (A2) added,

> They have these socials….but again, if you're not going there with somebody you know, you're still by yourself. If you're shy, you're still not going to go. They need something here that's going to, nah I wouldn't say force them to go, but encourage them to attend solo, so that they come out of it with maybe knowing somebody else. (Laura, A2)

Student participant Kamala's (S1) assertion that her "sense of confidence" drives her ability to attend social events unaccompanied is notable. A *sense of confidence* could be the necessary addition to the encouragement suggested by Laura (A2) when dealing with, as Laura (A2) described, "the ones who are shy." However, from what I gathered from both Laura (A2) and Kamala (S1), the behaviour of attending a social event alone is uncommon practice for learners. As such, widespread normalization of solo attendance to social events might further create opportunities for social integration and social circles if these types of on-campus events were created and promoted. Building social circles or communal support was said to be important for success as it acts as a supportive cushion that creates a sense of belonging, which, in turn, can act as a motivator. Notably, Sharon (S3) shared that she relies on her social circle for

114

information about resources and important events on-campus. She explained, "the thing is that some people know and some people don't. But then the people that don't know ask and they're like, oh, the people that do know share the information" (Sharon, S3). The network created in the social circles work to build one another up and keep each other informed. Sharon also acknowledged that as first-year students, "not everyone knows everything because we haven't explored every nook and crevasse of the campus yet" (Sharon, S3). Although multiple benefits of social circles were revealed, social circles can also create a web of misinformation if a member of the circle unknowingly shares incorrect information. The reliance on each other may cause members of the circle to be less likely to question information shared within the circle.

### Whether Today's Student Population Are Lacking Skills

Participants were asked to consider their personal experiences as well as any observations they have made of others in the college system when responding to whether they felt today's student population lacked any skills. Table 4 provides a breakdown of participant responses to whether or not they believed the current student population lack skills, while Figure 8 illustrates the type of skills or traits viewed as lacking. Table 5 further breaks down the responses provided by stakeholder group.

**Table 4**

*Participant Response to Whether Students are Lacking Skills*

| | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of participants who believe today's student population are lacking skills | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 7 |
| | 33.3% | | | 100% | | 100% | | 100% | | 77.8% |

115

**Figure 8**

*Skills or Traits Perceived as Lacking in Students*



**Skills or Traits Thought to be Lacking in Students**
**N=9**

| Skill/Trait | Value |
|---|---|
| Attention to Detail | 11.1% |
| Coping Skills | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | 11.1% |
| Independence | 11.1% |
| Life Skills | 22.2% |
| Motivation | 11.1% |
| Oral Communication | 11.1% |
| Organizational Skills | 11.1% |
| Patience | 11.1% |
| Perseverance | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | Most frequently mentioned by participants (44.4%) |
| Mathematical Skills | 11.1% |
| Self-Advocacy | 11.1% |
| Self-Awareness | 22.2% |
| Self-Confidence | 11.1% |
| Self-Regulation | 11.1% |
| Technical Skills | 11.1% |
| Time Management | 11.1% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | 11.1% |
| Written Communication | 22.2% |

*Note*. This figure outlines the skills participants viewed as lacking in today's post-secondary learners.

**Table 5**

*Skills Thought to be Lacking in Students*

| Skills/Traits | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attention to Detail | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | | 0% | | | 50% | | | 11.1% |
| Coping Skills | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | | | 2 |

| Skill | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 33.3% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | | ✓ | | | 1 |
| | 0% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Independence | | | ✓ | | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Life Skills (e.g. nutrition, mailing a letter) | ✓ | | | ✓ | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 22.2% |
| Motivation | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Oral Communication | | | ✓ | | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Organizational Skills | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Patience | | | | ✓ | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 11.1% |
| Perseverance | | ✓ | | | 1 |
| | 0% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 4 |
| | 33.3% | 50% | 50% | 50% | **44.4%** |
| Mathematical Skills* | | | ✓ | | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Self-Advocacy | | | | ✓ | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 11.1% |
| Self-Awareness | ✓ | | | ✓ | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 22.2% |
| Self-Confidence | | | ✓ | | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Self-Regulation | | | | ✓ | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 11.1% |
| Technical Skills* | | | ✓ | | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Time Management | | | | ✓ | 1 |
| | 0% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 11.1% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | | ✓ | | | 1 |
| | 0% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Written Communication | | | ✓ ✓ | | 2 |
| | 0% | 0% | **100%** | 0% | 22.2% |

*Commonly considered hard skills*

**Skills Believed to be Lacking Among Learners.** The majority (77.8%) of participants

indicated that today's college learners lack skills that would aid in student success. Although

mathematical and technical skills, commonly viewed as hard skills, were among the skills

mentioned as lacking, the majority of skills cited by participants were non-cognitive skills.

Problem solving/critical thinking (44.4%) was the skill most commonly cited by participants

overall, while written communication was cited by both faculty participants. It was notable that

at least two student participants displayed hesitation and, or, uncertainty when responding to this

question. Rachel (S2) was both hesitant and unsure in her response. When asked if she believes

today's students lacked any skills, she noted, "I don't see anything, unless I'm just not really like

paying attention" (Rachel, S2). Rachel (S2) did not see herself as someone who lacked skills and

had not taken note of her student peers to truly determine or pinpoint if a deficiency in skill

levels actually existed. Rachel (S2) went on to comment, "I don't know if there is any particular

one," demonstrating her uncertainty in responding to this question. From Kamala's (S1)

standpoint, she mentioned, "Students are generally pretty good." Kamala (S1) believed that

student skill levels are inherently good; however, she also asserted that students would benefit

from more foundational teaching of 'life skills.' Her perception that skill levels among college

learners are appropriate overall, accounts for why Kamala (S1) was not included as a participant

who viewed student skill levels as lacking in Table 4. However, her assertion that development

in certain soft skills would benefit student success, accounts for why her examples are displayed

in Table 5's listing of skills or traits thought to be lacking in students. Kamala (S1) explained, "I

think there are some life skills that would support us in academic success if we could get those

ground-works laid first. Like for instance, our program never covers nutrition, which I think is

really important" (Kamala, S1). Although problem solving/critical thinking was most commonly

cited by participants, *life skills*, *self-advocacy,* and *technical skills/technology* were the skills

participants felt most compelled to discuss. As a result, these skills are interpreted below

followed by emergent themes derived from participant perceptions of the *differences in skills among student groups* and the reasons *why learners lack skills*.

      ***Life Skills.*** Improvements to life skills (22.2%) was noted by participants Kamala (S1) and Laura (A2). Kamala (S1) expressed her belief that students are inherently good in their overall skill levels and ability to handle their schooling; however, she acknowledged, as did participants Tessa (F2) and Adam (A1), that it can take time to develop skill proficiency. Kamala (S1) asserted that students should be taught life skills early. In ideal circumstances, she believes the development of these skills would occur prior to entering higher education since the learning process is slow and hard to figure out alone, especially if not taught by one's parents. She explained,

> So many of the people in my program are like, you know, came right out of high school and are really just learning how different and how self-driven college is. And trying to get a handle on that while trying to get a handle on your classes, while trying to get a handle on living alone for the first time is super overwhelming in first-year. (Kamala, S1)

      Kamala (S1) brought attention to the complexity of student life and the multiple facets involved in figuring out one's place in post-secondary life, especially for learners coming from high school who lack nutritional awareness, organizational skills, and, or, self-awareness. Administrator Laura (A2) was also adamant that students are lacking nutritional knowledge and discussed its potential impact on the health and well-being of learners who, for some, are living on their own for the first time. She asserted, "another thing that's huge is nutrition. I think a lot of these kids are not eating properly. They skip their meals, or they'll eat things they shouldn't be eating" (Laura, A2). Laura (A2) also included skills such as mailing a letter, time management,

awareness, and self-discipline in her categorization of life skills that are lacking in learners of today.

**Self-Advocacy.** Although Laura (A2) did not name self-advocacy outright, her examples described learners who do not self-advocate, seek clarity, or alert the appropriate college staff members to the difficulties faced within the organizational structure. She explained, "They complain amongst themselves and it's almost like there is comfort in numbers. Yeah everyone else had the same problem so I guess it's okay" (Laura, A2). Laura (A2) shared a story about guiding her daughter to choose her classes as class selection opened up on the college system; however, instead received a system that did not work. Laura (A2) explained, "because of the influx of users getting in there, it was spinning and spinning and spinning." She (A2) went on to add that her daughter would receive messages from friends about the frustration and disappointment in attempting to navigate the online college system by stating, "So as this is going on, she's watching her feed and it's like *what's going on, what the heck, you know this is dumb, blah blah blah*. I don't know that those complaints really reached the proper levels." Laura (A2) pointed out that these complaints largely remain internalized within the students' social sphere and are not likely to be voiced to the proper channels. She asserted this notion that there is solace in a shared experience and in the belief that learners have little to no power to impact change or that nothing will or can be done. For example, Laura (A2) went on to say that during the exchange between her daughter and friends, "One of the kids said, *argh, whatever, I'll just take whatever is left*. And they went back to bed." She then added, "And those same kids are the ones who struggle later on. They don't get the classmates that they're used to having. Also, they lose that ability to collaborate with people that they know that they already work well with" (Laura, A2). Laura (A2) pointed to a potential loss of in-class support when learners of the same

social circle are unable to align their timetables and attend classes together. In her example, she demonstrated how unaware the student who dismissed the system error was of the potential impact their decision to "*take whatever is left*" would have on their academic and social well-being. Laura (A2) was conveying that taking "*whatever is left*" could potentially leave that student without a social circle to lift them up in times of need.

***Technical Skills and Technology.*** Technical skills, although not considered among the soft-skills category, were also noted to be lacking among a proportion of today's learner population (11.1%) and have been included to highlight their connection to communication. Tessa (F2) noted that in the program she teaches, "students have to have laptops." However, students are entering the program lacking a baseline understanding of how to navigate their computers as well as the institutional interface in which information, resources, and learning materials are housed and where assignments often must be submitted. Tessa (F2) expressed some frustration when discussing the lack of technical skills her students possess around navigating the institution's learning management system by asserting:

> As I am teaching them, or providing them information according to the learning
> outcomes that are outlined in my course; I can't then also spend another hour to two
> hours, or three hours to then teach them how to navigate [the college's learning
> management system] for example. (Tessa, F2)

She equated the depth of need to the same amount of time she would use for one of her lectures. Tessa (F2) went on to share how challenging technology is for some of her learners by stating,

> And so I'm also teaching a hybrid course, and I have students that are sitting there and
> they have no idea how to even post a discussion posting. Or they're having [pause] *how*

*do I email you [Tessa]?* And so it's, you have to kind of weigh it within the class to say

how much time can I actually spend walking you through it. And you might show them,

you do a general demonstration, but there's some students, I can see on their faces the

difficulties that they're having and I then would have to spend the time one-to-one to say,

'okay step here, right here.' I'm telling you how to do this. And as much as I can say 'go

to the help menu,' they can't navigate the help. So sometimes the things that we require

students to have is above. The basic is probably even above what they might have, so it

can cause some challenges. (Tessa, F2)

Tessa (F2) shared how a significant number of learners in her program enter college

without the basic technological capacity to perform the day-to-day duties expected of all

students. Learners who are not yet aware of email functionality impede communication channels

with their professor and institution. Learners unaware of the functionality for their school's

learning management system also encounter impediments to accessing course materials when

trying to submit course work, and face challenges keeping pace with the rhythm and speed of the

course.

**Differences in Skills Among Student Groups.** Participants spoke of skills and skill

levels as differing among student groups. In particular, program type, program year, culture,

residency status, and maturity emerged as contributing factors to the perceived varied levels of

soft skills among learners of today.

***Skill Differences by Program Type.*** Participants Kamala (S1), Wanda (Stf2), and Carol

(Stf1) made comparisons of soft-skill levels to academic programs. There was a belief that

students with particular skills and, or, experiences are more prone to enter particular types of

programs. For example, Kamala (S1) made a connection between interpersonal skills and her program by asserting:

> I think that, for instance, like the people in my program have great interpersonal skills just because naturally we are all pretty extroverted and pretty comfortable and confident in speaking to one another and to other people. Whereas, a lot of artists are pretty introverted. (Kamala, S1)

 According to Kamala (S1), learners naturally attempt to seek programs that meet their interests, desires, and also which complement their skill levels. In Kamala's (S1) case, she entered a program in which she could express herself orally and utilize her teamwork skills; traits that she believed herself to be highly proficient in and felt comfortable employing. On the other hand, Wanda (Stf2) discussed students being drawn to particular programs based on experiences that drive motivation toward certain areas of study. Wanda (Stf2) agreed, "that there are different types of students that are attracted to different types of programs." However, I believe Wanda (Stf2) was associating "different types of students," with the varied experiences that students bring with them to the college. In other words, student motivation to enter a particular program would be largely based on past experiences rather than having proficiency in particular skills. Wanda (Stf2) explained,

> And the thing is about those students they have those, when you talk about an onion, they have the most layers to their life. They have the most diverse situations that they're coming from and a lot of them are getting into the programs they are getting into because they want to help others.

It is the 'experiences' that reside underneath the onion layers that act as the driving force to compel some learners to enter specific fields of study. Wanda (Stf2) articulated that there are

"certain students who are visiting our offices for counselling for triage. So we know their coping and their self-regulation is low in terms of them being able to manage it." In other words, students may have experienced trauma personally or vicariously through family or friends, and enter programs to take action; however, they may not have the level of soft skills to aptly handle aspects of the program or college life. Wanda (Stf2) provided an example of this by explaining,

You got an SSW [Social Service Worker] student whose, you know been triggered because they watched a video of abuse in their classroom, right. So how do we build that resilience? And, how do we help them to obtain the soft skills through their chosen program, is another question.

Wanda's (Stf2) example illustrated the internal battle students face when intrinsically motivated to pursue a program; yet, lack the tools or skills necessary to thrive in it, cope, or navigate through the obstacles. Wanda's (Stf2) questioning of how to remedy such soft-skill deficits revealed and acknowledged that soft-skills deficits exist and that developing soft skills in learners is a challenge facing today's colleges.

Wanda (Stf2) also spoke about her work with institutional data and how it revealed that students from particular academic programs have a higher "number of incidences." Specifically, there are certain programs that have more occurrences of conflict and bullying amongst their students. Notably, the programs mentioned were all in the community services field such as Social Service Worker and Early Childhood Education. I have only mentioned two of the programs revealed by Wanda (Stf2) to help preserve the anonymity of the study college since the other programs may be less commonly offered across the college system. Wanda's (Stf2) example of conflict and bullying amongst Social Service Worker and Early Childhood Education

students suggested that learners who gravitate to these programs might be less likely to possess skills needed for self-regulation, to combat conflict, or to address bullying behaviour.

Other differences in programs were highlighted by staff member Carol (Stf1) who noted that recognizing skills needed for success in particular programs can be difficult for learners. As such, having worked with students over the years from a variety of programs, Carol (Stf1) shared an example of how guiding, motivating, and approaches to helping students to recognize and develop their skills tend to have program-specific challenges. Carol (Stf1) explained, "the experience from business [programs] you can easily put into the context of what that's going to look like in the workforce." She went on to explain how programs that encompass more subjectivity in their pedagogy differ, by noting:

> You can't as easily do that in an Arts program. So when I would say to somebody, you know what, if your manager asks you to create a business plan to present to a client, a marketing plan, to present to a client and the client doesn't go for that, what do you do? Do you walk away, throw your hands up and say oh well? Or do you say wait, let me see what I can do. I will negotiate. We'll come up with something better. In the Arts experience, it's a bit different. I have created this part of my soul, here you are. And then, so my discussion is 'round, one person might not like it, but do you think somebody else would? *Yes.* So don't be discouraged by this because somebody else will come along and say that's wonderful. I give Van Gogh as my example lately to the Arts students. I hate Van Gogh. I don't like his work at all. I might find piece of it hanging in my house, I don't understand what all the fuss is all about. But there's a lot of fuss. So we can assume that other people like him. Because I don't like him is he a failure? *No.* I just don't like him. So I think it's harder for them to have those skills in certain fields. (Carol, Stf1)

Carol's (Stf1) expression of program-specific challenges spoke to the intersectionality of program pedagogy, skills development, a feeling of success, and the workforce. Her example illustrated that her role in coaching and helping students to develop can be more challenging when interacting with students whose course work and classroom experiences (such as in programs that are primarily subjective) are less translatable to common work environments. In these situations, students cannot as easily make connections to future success or an end goal.

Additional differences mentioned among participants included distinctions based on age and maturity levels.

***Skill Differences by Age and Maturity.*** Participants disclosed thoughts on the differences in soft-skill levels by mentioning age and maturity as factors. Kamala (S1) articulated that "the older you are coming into college, the more well-adjusted you tend to be." These words appeared to be a reflection of her preparation for entering college after experiencing a gap year, attending university, and travelling. After reflecting on Kamala's (S1) explanation of differences in the student population, I believe the student differences she was speaking of had less to do with age, and more to do with student maturity. For example, Kamala (S1) stated, "it's a slow learning curve to just figure out how you work and develop that self-awareness between the years." Her statement acknowledged a progressive development not solely because of age, but rather in the skills people develop over time. Moreover, later in our discussion Kamala (S1) asserted, "the difference between first and fourth year in a lot of these soft skills is noticeable and you do learn to manage your time in school and you learn how your brain works and how you learn." It is true that a learner will age over the course of their program; however, Kamala (S1) used language that spoke more of a learner's development that is grounded in experiences gained as a result of advancing through each year of academic and social post-secondary life.

Faculty member Tessa (F2) also spoke of age, yet, was adamant that it is not necessarily a determiner of skill. Instead, maturity and life circumstances were seen as contributors to the development and use of skills. Tessa (F2) explained,

Skill sets are different. Even in terms of [pause] like a mature student that has [a] family. The time and availability might be different than [pause] and I'm not saying necessarily that's the same across the board, but it might be different than an 18-year old that just came out of high school and their parents are paying for their education; it's a very different dynamic, they might not be required to work.

Tessa (F2) pointed out that her example is not the same for everyone and that personal circumstances are individualized, along with behaviour and skill levels. Different types of experiences allow for different types of skills to develop regardless of a person's age. Tessa (F2) shared a story with me of a young learner who she felt was proactive, organized, and would regularly seek out resources to ensure she was on-track and successful. Tessa (F2) explained,

I had a student today that said [*Tessa*] I just want to check. And she told me everything that she's doing and all I said was 'yes you're right,' 'yes you're right,' 'yes you're right.' *Okay I'm good. I'll see you in two months*. Okay, when? What? And she's like, *here's the meeting*. You have December set? I said, 'listen, backup. I don't even have December, okay, so just in December contact me.' She's checking in with me all the time. Very young student. Young!

In this case, the student "went to school early. Her parents put her in school early" (F2), so she experienced and developed from those experiences earlier than many of her peers. Maturity, self-responsibility, and the ability to manage time and stay organized were resultant from being thrust into a variety of experiences early. However, this student would be considered

an exception in the eyes of Wanda (Stf2). Wanda (Stf2) discussed soft skills as mainly lacking in adolescent learners aged 17-18 who enter post-secondary education for the first time. Her rationale for highlighting this segment of the student population was, as she stated, "maybe because they've been children, they've had no responsibility, no bills, no nothing." The lack of opportunity to experience responsibilities prior to college life, in turn, was suggested to create challenges for this group of learners. Sharon's (S3) view and personal experience coincided with Wanda's sentiments about age differences and Kamala's view of skill growth through experiences. Sharon (S3) noted that students who are "fresh out of high school, don't show up as much" to classes as they are less likely to possess the same level of motivation as "older students." When referring to older students, Sharon (S3) noted, "even just by like a couple of years, I mean I'm not much older than 18, but the mature students tend to like take things more seriously." She (S3) explained that mature learners likely have a specific reason for pursuing a program, while learners who transition from high school "might be still kind of in limbo." These learners are uncertain of their next steps, their career goals, or believe they have time to "*waste almost.*" Sharon (S3) recalled her state of limbo when pursuing her first post-secondary program. However, she attributed her decision to withdraw from the program, pursue employment, and then "a program that was kind of more geared to what I could see myself doing" as her motivation and reason for returning to higher education.

***International versus Domestic.*** Participants also noted soft skills differences between international and domestic students. According to Nina (F1), she has witnessed international students get placed into programs based on availability rather than a learner's desire to pursue the field. She would ask students, "why are you in this program?" and they would say,

*Well we didn't want to be in this program. We applied for another program at [the college]; it got full by the time our visas were approved. We're here, we're off the plane, it's Friday before Labour Day. We come with our papers to [the college], they say sorry that program is full how about you pick something else?* (Nina, F1)

According to Nina (F1), these students are put into situations where they must quickly decide on a new path based on a limited number of remaining programs. The impact, Nina (F1) noted, is that "they're not motivated" in their newly chosen field because they "don't like the material and they don't have the competencies to succeed."

Nina (F1) also spoke of a possible link between varying skill levels among learners and the recruitment of international students from different parts of the world. For example, Nina (F1) spoke of particular countries where she found the dedication and motivation of the learners to be exceptional; she expressed, "it takes me aback sometimes," when discussing their levels in those skills. On the other hand, she explained that there are students who are "all about credential. Rather than the learning." She explained her belief that students interact with their institution based on cultural differences, which, in part, is because certain skills and values are focused on more in particular countries.

Rachel (S2) also noted cultural differences among her international peers. She discussed how working part-time in a frontline position at the college has highlighted for her a difference in how learners in this student population interact with college services. Specifically, Rachel (S2) noted that international students "grab on to other people who are also part of their culture. Like the same culture" when seeking service or help. She went on to explain that when interacting with international students in her work capacity, she has noticed that the friends who accompany the learner seeking help, tend to also engage in the interaction. She asserted that the friends are

there to help "guide them through," giving the student a sense of comfort. Rachel (S2) emphasized that this creates an "at home" feel while acknowledging the difficulties international students must feel to be in "a different country" away from family and friends. She went on to explain,

> So, the fact that [the college] is like very diverse so that a lot of people are able to see and communicate with other people who are in the same culture as them is very helpful for them as well, yeah. (Rachel, S2)

Rachel (S2) acknowledged that the diversity of the institution's make-up impacts a learner's sense of belonging, comfort levels in communicating with others, and ease for which they can form social circles.

In terms of what is expected from the Canadian educational system, Nina (F1) noted that domestic students and immigrants are at an advantage over many international students because of their greater familiarity of the Canadian education system. She explained,

> But so that's where I find there's a big gap between the international and the domestic students. Domestic students, even if they're immigrants, tend to get it and they get the system and I think that they are a little bit more aware on what they're getting into. I think they're also [pause] a big thing is that they're also accustomed to our academic integrity policies and what is acceptable or not. Where international [students], in my experience, are not. I've had students bribe me with literally cash and jewellery. Yeah, I've been at the podium and they're there and they're like, *Miss I really need you to do this, here's a bracelet*. And I'm like... (Nina, F1)

The differing view of academic integrity and appropriate ways to interact on-campus has led Nina (F1) to reconsider how she manages her classroom. She stated, "So that I think is a big

issue, is just the whole [pause] and so also the fact that I'm a female, right; there is that" (Nina, F1). As a female professor, Nina (F1) spoke about how she is sometimes treated. For example, Nina (F1) recalled a situation in her classroom where two male students began to speak during an exam, she noted, "And I'm very strict on no talking." After asking the students to stop talking, they told Nina (F1) "that they were talking about getting a ride home together after." She explained, "I didn't understand because they were speaking in their language, so I didn't understand what they were saying. But they were talking through the whole test and showing each other." My understanding from our conversation was that Nina (F1) would not expect the same disregard and resistance of the rules shown by these students if enforced by her male professor counterparts, especially after repeated warnings. Nina (F1) told me that she eventually had to ask the students to leave the classroom while the test was going on. Because of their resistance, security was called. Nina (F1) said that after the class was over, "He waited for me outside the classroom and followed me." A move, I believe, she felt to be a way to intimidate her and to exercise some form of control over the situation and the space the student believed he could and should occupy.

**Why Students Lack Skills.** Participant responses revealed three overarching reasons for soft-skills deficits among adult learners. The causes have been categorized as *Technology and Social Media*, a *Generational Change in Pedagogical Approaches*, as well as a *Lack of Preparedness for Post-Secondary Life*.

***Technology and Social Media.*** Participants shared perspectives on the impact that the evolution and increase of technology has had on the development, type, and the level of skills current learners possess at the point of post-secondary entry. Laura (A2) spoke of a learner population that has grown up in an era immersed with online interactions. As a result,

socialization has involved less in-person contact or live phone conversations with others, and more volleying of text messages that can be responded to at the convenience of the receiver. Laura (A2) explained that the rise in social media has limited the development of skills necessary for face-to-face communication and interactions. She noted, "They have no idea how to speak to people" (Laura, A2). She went on to add, "They're too invested in social media" and suggested that students learn to:

> Speak to people face-to-face and not sit there in a group where everybody is on their phone in a group chat. Pick up the phone and talk to somebody. That's another one; they don't pick up the phone and talk. (Laura, A2)

> Behaviours that were believed to be common before, such as communicating orally by

phone, have now been inundated with more text-based communication. I believe what Laura (A2) was alluding to, is a shift in communication that largely omits the use of listening to others, which, in turn, has changed the way people interact and the development of skills used to interact. For example, listening to the intonation of a person's voice to grasp context and respond accordingly becomes harder to be developed if not practiced orally by phone, video, or through in-person communication.

On the other hand, Wanda (Stf2) spoke to the impact that technological advances have had on the written skill levels of post-secondary learners. She shared an example of her experience in communicating with students in her professional capacity through email and the difficulties she found students have in distinguishing email communication with text messaging. Wanda (Stf2) explained,

> I used to check the email for our department every morning and I would literally get [pause] I was just flabbergasted at the questions I would get that were simply in the

subject bar. There was no 'hi,' 'hello,' it was literally just like sending a text message to a friend. And, I think the, maybe just being in a public institution, your 'hello' and you're used to those niceties and those 'how are you' and 'sincerely XXX XXX' when you're signing your names at the bottom. But at that point, umm, I think yah, it's just completely they have no communication skills and a hundred percent, it's the technology, right. They've grown up on it. They are used to having everything at their second. And that maybe, that's a barrier to their other skills because they are used to bite-sized information.

Wanda (Stf2) addressed the difficulties she perceives in today's learners who often do not make, what she viewed, as appropriate distinctions between professional communication and dialogue that one might have with their friend. The normalization of bite-sized information becomes second nature for many learners who transition from high school to post-secondary life due to the frequent use of such communication (bite-sized) in their everyday lives. As a result, entering post-secondary life without knowledge of how to distinguish forms of communication, such as professional versus casual, creates a disconnect between the sender and receiver of the message.

Similarly, Tessa (F2) spoke of her experience receiving emails from her students that begin with, "*Hey girl.*" She went on to add*, "*But I think there's a sense of casualness that happens with students" (Tessa, F2). There was this idea that students are sometimes unable to toggle between professional practice lines when warranted. In situations where these students do not abide by the social expectations of particular environments, the perception or intent of the student's message is distorted or negatively received. However, as Wanda (Stf2) re-emphasized her belief in institutional-student partnerships for success, she suggested that colleges begin to be

mindful of the type of messages sent to students. She explained, "This comes back to us. How are we communicating with them? When we're sending them big giant long emails from any department, I think we can agree that they're not, they're not reading that." Wanda (Stf2) suggested colleges consider the ways in which learners receive and process information and seek to communicate on a parallel level, notably, by incorporating communication that are 'bite-sized.' Her rationale, "that's how they've learned to communicate," so, in turn, colleges "need to brush up on those skills" (Wanda, Stf2). Wanda (Stf2) saw long emails as an ineffective way of communicating with a generation of students who are used to sending and receiving bite-sized information at a rapid pace.

***Generational Change in Pedagogical Approach.*** Nina (F1) spoke about her observation of students entering a variety of college programs with a minimal math requirement. She (F1) asserted, "they don't have enough quantitative skills." She (F1) attributed the lack of quantitative skills to the pedagogical approach to teaching math in elementary and secondary schools. She noted her belief that there has been a change over time that has negatively impacted the retention of foundational quantitative and problem solving skills by explaining:

> When I was taking math in elementary and high school, it was just like problem after problem after problem after problem with like a few tweaks here and there, but it was just that repetition that I think gets in there. (Nina, F1)

Nina (F1) further added, "I don't think they do that. I think they do a little bit, but not enough of the repetition." As Nina (F1) and I spoke, there was an emphasis made on educators who could ignite a passion for particular subject areas and those who could also diffuse it. Nina (F1) spoke about how a teacher's comfort in teaching a particular subject can transfer fear or confidence in students and their trajectory in learning it. Nina (F1) explained, "A lot of

elementary teachers don't like math. So they have a fear of math, so they're not good at teaching it." She added, "And then they get to high school. All the math teachers that my kids have had have been great. Like really actually very good math teachers;" however, she (F1) noted at that point the students "don't have that foundation" to flourish in the subject. Although the technical aspects of mathematical skills were not a focus of this research study, the lack of foundational skills, including problem solving/critical thinking, to master a subject area translated, in part, to a lack of preparedness for aspects of post-secondary life.

*Preparedness for Post-Secondary.* A lack of preparedness was commonly cited among participants as a response to why today's post-secondary learners lack soft skills. Participants mentioned that to some degree, a lack of preparation in high school for higher education influences a student's soft-skills levels and ability to be successful in post-secondary settings.

Wanda (Stf2) noted that the institutional structures in-place during high school do not appropriately prepare learners for the expectations of post-secondary life. She (Stf2) pointed to stark distinctions between the expectations of learners in high school versus the expectations that are immediately thrust upon students at the very beginning of their post-secondary journey. Wanda (Stf2) explained, "I think they also need to be resilient because they're coming from an education system that doesn't fail them, so they are not used to getting failed, so all of a sudden." Wanda (Stf2) talked about the 'no-zero policy' employed by high schools and how she believes it has negatively impacted the development of skills. For example, skills such as personal responsibility and resilience have not been adequately developed in learners who have not experienced consequences as a result of 'failure' in their elementary and secondary school environments. Learners who have faced few or no consequences in relation to non-studious behaviour are largely unaware of the emotions associated with, or evoked from tangible

consequences that are enforced in higher education. As a result, these learners struggle to cope and traverse their new relationship with schooling in the post-secondary realm. Wanda (Stf2) revealed that learners who are suddenly met with class structures, timetable schedules, and academic demands that are significantly different from their high school experiences are faced with unrealistic expectations that result in learner difficulties. She explained,

> I think there is not just a level, and it goes along with the level of preparedness that they have to be. I think organization, time management, are at the top of that. Because there's no other time in your life and I find it funny that they start...that the post-secondary education or just even our culture in general, starts to really lambaste students with an intense schedule in terms of classes approximately 18 hours a week; and that's just a baseline. Plus, the extra one to two hours per hour that you've been in class that you should be spending [doing homework]. I find it ridiculous that it falls on 17 and 18 year olds. Because that time management piece is, I think, the most challenging for them and I think it's the most necessary for them to have and the degree of preparedness is [pause] you see them coming from high schools, a little, it's a lot different. (Wanda, Stf2)

Wanda (Stf2) spoke about what she believed to be distinctions between high school and post-secondary systems that result in functioning barriers to student success when transitioning to college life. Carol (Stf1) strengthened the notion of learners needing to encounter failure, hardship, or consequences in their life to be able to learn and grow from the experiences. She (Stf1) accounted for a learner's ability to bounce back and deal with adversity as likely coming from individuals, who, prior to coming to college, have dealt with adverse situations in their life and are now in a better position to recognize a challenge and then cope, pivot, adjust, or adapt in ways that allow them to bounce back from it. She (Stf1) asserted, "it's the students who

genuinely have adversity in their lives who seem to do better." What I gathered from our conversation was this idea that the development of skills are largely based on a student's prior experiences, which, in turn, is why Carol (Stf1) contends that teaching learners how to deal with adversity might not be possible. She (Stf1) acknowledged that her many years of working in an advising capacity with students and noted that her interactions with current day learners have changed over time. Carol (Stf1) explained that she is finding that many students have "less and less of this ability to handle any type of adversity." She (Stf1) illustrated this point by sharing examples of two student scenarios that would fall on either end of the spectrum. Carol (Stf1) explained,

> You know I have a student who at 14 got emancipated from his parents and has been
> working full-time to support himself ever since. And yet finished high school and has
> come to college and is doing okay, you know not perfect, but he's going to get his
> credential and he has learned how to just deal with it. Like, life sucks and I am just going
> to keep moving forward is kind of his attitude versus another student who has really had
> no adversity in their life and is overwhelmed with the fact that, to quote, *my teacher is*
> *being so mean and expects me to hand in all my assignments on time, that's impossible.*"
> And I, I feel like the students who have genuinely had to manage and persevere are the
> ones who do better in the long run. And so I feel that the biggest skill that we can teach
> them, which we have no way of doing, is how to handle adversity and how to keep
> moving forward.

Laura (A2) echoed the notion that current students entering post-secondary education are ill-prepared to tackle new responsibilities and challenges associated with college life. Laura (A2) expressed that elementary and secondary school systems are not helping learners to develop the

communication and basic life skills needed to self-advocate and relay their needs. Laura (A2) explained, "These students today, their communication skills are terrible. And this is not a college issue, this is a high school, this is a secondary school issue. It stems, actually I'm gonna go back to as far as kindergarten." Laura (A2) went on to share a personal story of how she believed her daughter's experience learning to read in which she was taught sight recognition of only consonant letters, rather than full words at an early age, had impacted her ability to communicate to this day. I gathered from Laura that the early developmental experiences her daughter encountered, she believed, were closely tied to her current skill use. Laura (A2) explained,

> And so she has that problem today. She reads like a fiend, but for all the reading that she does she reads really quickly, she's a very good reader, but there's [pause] I think there's some misinterpretations going on. And intake is not the same as what they are able to project and write. So I think again that with these students I see a lot of them struggling, and they're not able to clearly communicate what it is that they want.

As noted earlier, Laura (A2) described this lack of ability to effectively communicate as impacting students' "confidence about voicing their opinions." In essence, the foundational basis for particular skills resonates, in some way, to current skill use, and can bleed into other skills or behaviour. Sharon (S3) showed how critical soft skills are in navigating life scenarios that become more prevalent once you leave high school, such as in higher education or the workforce. Sharon (S3) depicted a high school experience that would support notions of being ill-prepared for life beyond this school sector. Sharon (S3) spoke about a bureaucratic process to high school learning that she felt lacked the type of integrated knowledge building that could

explain how concepts learned in high school would translate into dealing with the complex life situations and interactions she would later encounter after high school. Sharon (S3) explained,

High school, you get into high school and you're just kind of like, oh, no one teaches you anything. It's just kind of like read the book, do this. And then you get thrown into the real world or the workplace and people are [pause] there's problems, you know, within the workplace and then with the personal relationships in the workplace, and then at home, or all other places and you just realize, oh it's not like a one note environment. There's so many other factors with other people and then there's other things affecting them that they bring to the table. You can't just walk in assuming everything is going to be daisies and rainbows.

Sharon (S3) left high school ill-prepared for the sudden relational expectations that come with being an independent post-secondary adult learner. She (S3) associated an initial distorted view of reality, life, and expectations beyond high school with the lack of connection between the course work taught in high school and real-life social interactions and situations.

Similarly, Wanda (Stf2) questioned how high schools were preparing learners to contend with the various and often-new social situations that arise in adulthood. Wanda (Stf2) attributed the lack of life skills in today's learners to an overall societal shift by expressing:

I think they are. I don't [know] if that's today versus yesterday's. I think maybe it's been a continuous thing, because we live in a world that is very ambiguous. A lot of precarious nature of work. We've got, you know, in a free market economy, so, you know, the neo-liberal cultural kind of climate that we live in, things change fast. They don't really give anybody time to catch up. And, I think that falls in line and its kind of a trickle down effect to both the institution and the student. So, how much are we, how much are we

139

preparing them today versus five years ago? The preparation is different. The outcome is different. You know we have to pay attention to being agile and having our students be agile.

From what I gathered, two main items caused this societal shift. First, students are being prepared for post-secondary studies in different ways, so the outcome or level of their preparedness is different. Second, with the insurrection of an increasingly 'fast paced' world, learners who were not prepared in ways to pivot, adapt, or address quickly shifting situations are negatively impacted.

Laura (A2) provided a parental viewpoint to the matter of ill-prepared learners. She reflected on her parental role and others who act as what she referred to as 'helicopter parents' (parents who largely manage the affairs of their children on their behalf). When discussing *independence,* Laura (A2) explained, "they know what independence is, but this generation, my daughter's generation, they know what it is but they don't feel it necessarily because we've had to be helicopter parents in light of all this craziness out there." Laura (A2) believes that dominating the management of her child's high school affairs, along with other parents who have acted similarly, has contributed to a generation of learners who lack the level of independence and preparedness needed to traverse the post-secondary school system.

**Third Round of Questions: Discussion About Impact of Soft Skills on the Student Journey**

The third round of questioning sought to explore the impact of soft skills on various facets of a learner's college journey. Specifically, my conversations with participants of this study delved into the effect soft skills might have on student experiences, personal and academic development, academic and social engagement with their institution, and a student's decision or

ability to remain enrolled in school and persist to graduation. This round of questioning sought to investigate **Research Question Two**, which asked: **How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and decisions to persist to graduation)?**

To answer research question two, the following five questions were explored:

1. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft skills and its impact on a *student's college experiences*?

2. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft skills and its impact on a *student's development*?

3. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft skills and its impact on a *student's engagement with their college (academic and social)*?

4. Considering the list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft skills and its impact on a *student's decisions/ability to remain in school and persist to graduation*?

5. What could be done to improve soft skills in college students?

The results of these questions are presented below.

### *Soft Skills and its Impact on a Student's College Experience*

Prior to this question being asked, the term '*soft skills*' as I have defined it in this study was explained to participants. Additionally, an example list of soft skills was provided to participants for review and as reference over the remaining time of each interview (see Appendix N for List of Soft Skills). I feel it is important to note that once the list was provided to participants, I observed a relatively similar reaction among participants that included head nods in agreement and immediate commentary of the importance and usefulness of the skills listed. For example, once Sharon (S3) received the soft-skills list, she expressed, "I wish you would've taken this out sooner." She (S3) went on to add, "all of these skills, a hundred percent you need all of these to be successful." Participants appeared to recognize not only how impactful the listed skills might be on a learner's college experience, but also of the importance for sharing such a list for reinforcing its value on student success and facets of everyday life. Given my initial observations, it was no surprise that all participants suggested that soft skills have an ability to impact the way a student experiences their college. Figure 9 charts the particular soft skills participants perceived as impacting student college experiences, while Table 6 segments the soft skills mentioned by each stakeholder group.

**Figure 9**

*Skills Thought to Influence College Experiences*
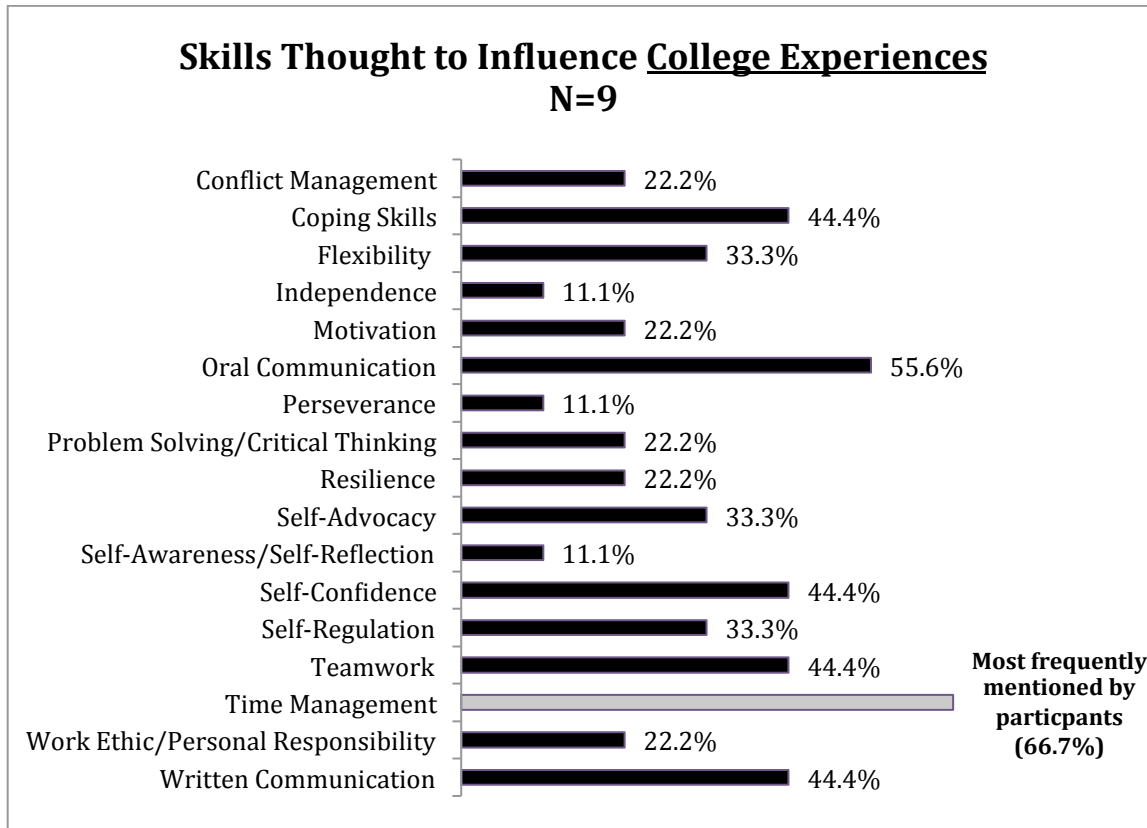


*Note.* This figure illustrates participant perceptions of skills thought to impact a learner's college experiences.

**Table 6**

*Skills Thought to Impact a Student's College Experience*

| Non-Cognitive/Soft skills | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conflict Management | | | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 22.2% |
| Coping Skills | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 50% | | 44.4% |
| Flexibility | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Independence | | | ✓ | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Motivation | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Oral Communication | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | 5 |
| | **100%** | | | 50% | | 0% | | 50% | | 55.6% |
| Perseverance* | | | | ✓ | | | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | | | 2 |
| | 66.7% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Resilience | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Self-Advocacy | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |
| Self-Awareness/ Self-Reflection* | | | | | ✓ | | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Self-Confidence | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 0% | | **100%** | | 44.4% |
| Self-Regulation | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |
| Teamwork | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | **100%** | | 50% | | 44.4% |
| Time Management | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | 6 |
| | **100%** | | | **100%** | | 50% | | 0% | | **66.7%** |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Written Communication | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | 4 |
| | 66.7% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 50% | | 44.4% |

*Skill or trait not documented in the soft-skills list provided to participants*

At 66.7%, *time management* was the most frequently cited soft skill participants perceived as impacting a learner's college experience. This was followed by *oral communication* (55.6%). A review of stakeholder group responses showed that all three-student participants mentioned *oral communication* and *time management*, both staff participants cited *flexibility*, *resilience*, and *time management*, both faculty members named *teamwork*, and both administrators cited *self-confidence*. Two themes emerged from participant discussions around the topic of soft skills and learner experiences. The first surrounded a learner's ability to balance their social and academic worlds for the enhancement of their college experience, while the second revealed the influence past experiences have on learner soft-skills levels, the program they pursue, and current post-secondary experiences.

**Finding Social and Academic Balance.** Kamala (S1) equated college experiences to an ability to engage with one's school. Kamala (S1) discussed soft skills as often being more important than the talents or cognitive capabilities that learners arrive to college with since you need soft skills to engage with your school environment. She (S1) expressed, "you get out of college as much as you put in;" a phrase she revealed was often touted by her professors.

Moreover, Sharon (S3) shared her belief that experiencing school life is a delicate balance of social and academic elements. For her (S3), the prioritizing of academic and social life is dependent on the weight and type of schoolwork compared to how greatly a social event might be valued. She (S3) expressed, "it would depend on many things. Like what exactly am I prioritizing? Is it a test? The percentage? Like, what is the weight of it?" Sharon's (S3) thought process when choosing whether to attend a social event or to stay home to complete schoolwork took into account deadline dates and how important she viewed an assignment based on its impact on her final grade. Wanda's (Stf2) experience as a TA marking assignments supported

this sense of student rationalization. Wanda (Stf2) explained that the view among students "is a five percent assignment shouldn't have as much effort as a twenty percent." She went on to say, "Granted that's true, but I'd get a bunch of stuff that I could tell was written like 30 minutes before class was started. So I think time management and the ability to effectively prioritize" are necessary.

However, participants saw the balancing of multiple facets of life to be challenging for today's learners, especially at a time when learners become inundated with the 'new;' a new school environment, new classroom experiences, new friends and more. Sharon (S3) revealed how contending with the 'new' can be even more challenging when battling mental health. She (S3) spoke of school, work, and extra-curricular activities as being difficult for her as a person who suffers from depression. When sharing her story, she spoke of her high school experience and how rapidly her experience began to change when depression set in. She explained, "the first two years I was doing good and then kind of the attendance, grades, it all just kind of went down." Findings show that learners are faced with multiple commitments that can impact their attendance, grades, and how they experience their learning environment. However, possessing the skills to balance these multiple commitments can aid in their post-secondary experience.

***Skills Needed to Balance.*** Participants saw time management as being important for balancing the multiple academic, social, and personal commitments students contend with inside and outside of the school setting. Kamala (S1) expressed, "if you have bad time management, you'll over sleep for classes and lose marks." However, participants also noted that "it's a combination of things" (Wanda, Stf2). For example, self-regulation and coping skills were seen as necessary for handling conflict or high-stress situations. Self-confidence, resilience, or the flexibility to bounce back or flex one's mind was noted as being necessary to "learn materials in

a different manner or learn materials outside of their passion" (Wanda, Stf2). Laura (A2) saw self-confidence as being necessary for advocating for one's self, which would then impact the way a learner experiences their learning environment, and Nina (F1) expressed that *self-advocacy*, "whether they have an accommodation or not, or might need one, to even just coming up and talking to the prof face-to-face" could enhance learner classroom experiences. In terms of written and oral communication, participants also viewed these skills as being influential to academic and social experiences of learners. For example, challenges occur for learners who are tasked with presentations, yet, "are terrified of presenting in front of a classroom" (Wanda, Stf2), or unable to find the words to express themselves effectively.

Critical thinking, oral and written communication, and other skills mentioned by participants were all noted to contribute to the way a student interacts and engages with their institution and to form social circles. The importance of developing skills to form, thrive within, and keep social circles was notable throughout this research study and will continue to be addressed as findings are revealed. Rachel (S2) saw the formation of social circles as enhancing her academic and social experiences, and as a positive source of motivation for her. According to Adam (A1), camaraderie, such that is gained from the formation of social circles, presents an ability to be one's true self and build a sense of community; however, he also noted that a lack of self-confidence could hinder these connections.

**Experiences, Skills, and Program Type.** There was a general belief that the level and type of skills needed for positive college experiences are often tied to program type. For example, participants talked specifically about programs where they observed a general need for particular skills. Wanda (Stf2) commented on her experiences interacting with students in programs affiliated with the arts. She (Stf2) commented on her observation of arts students

accessing counselling services at a higher rate; often "around those stressful peak times in the student life cycle, so around exams, high midterms." Wanda (Stf2) went on to explain,

> Maybe it goes back to self-regulation and being able to manage their emotions, but as I said it's a combination of things in terms of their time management being tested at a time where developmentally their brain can't even comprehend certain things. It's not even fully developed and they're being tested to the point where a lot of, I think you know, fully mature-aged adults wouldn't be able to handle the stress of that school. So whether it's self-regulation and their coping skills, and just a combination of those things tend to explode and you'll see students in a couple [of] situations, other than that high-risk, needing psychological intervention. But we'll have students that physically will punch something. Like a physical object or each other, I mean physical altercations happen. And I think that is a huge stressor, and I think it really negatively impacts their self-regulation and their schooling in general.

Wanda's (Stf2) observations provided the impression that students require a unique combination of skills to survive and thrive in their chosen program. The correct formula of skill set is largely influenced by curriculum, course load, and the academic requirements associated with each program, such as a unique identifier. Other participants commented on students in social services and business programs needing to have an ability to work in teams based on the significant amount of group work that is expected in these types of programs.

Tessa (F2) mentioned, "So for us, in our program, working in groups is very important because that's probably the essence of when you go out in the field, so we need students to practice that." Given the link between particular skills and program type, Kamala (S1) expressed that it is important to think critically about one's academic program choice before entering

college. She (S1) said, "you know, even that like critical thinking of just like choosing something that you know you'll be into is such a huge thing for setting yourself up for success." She saw having passion for your chosen field of study as an initial and critical step toward success and a meaningful college experience. Findings outlined that student experiences are heavily tied to a learner's development, engagement, and decision-making process while navigating the post-secondary environment.

### *Soft Skills and its Impact on a Student's Development*

A student's development was considered to be categorized in two ways, as personal and academic. It should be noted that similar to the definitions of student success, each participant of this study characterized or viewed personal and academic development in different ways. As a result, there were various skills that were noted by each participant as being impactful on each form of development.

**Personal Development.** Figure 10 illustrates the soft skills participants expressed as being impactful to personal development, while Table 7 provides a breakdown by stakeholder group. This is followed by my interpretation of why participants associated those skills with such development.

**Figure 10**

*Skills Thought to Influence Personal Development*



**Skills Thought to Influence <u>Personal Development</u>**
**N=9**

| Skill | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Conflict Management | 22.2% |
| Coping Skills | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | |
| Independence | |
| Motivation | 22.2% |
| Oral Communication | 22.2% |
| Perseverance | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | 22.2% |
| Resilience | |
| Self-Advocacy | 11.1% |
| Self-Confidence | |
| Self-Regulation | |
| Team Work | 22.2% |
| Time Management | 22.2% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | 22.2% |
| Written Communication | 11.1% |

**Most frequently mentioned by participants (33.3%, 33.3%)**

**Most frequently mentioned by participants (33.3%, 33.3%, 33.3%)**
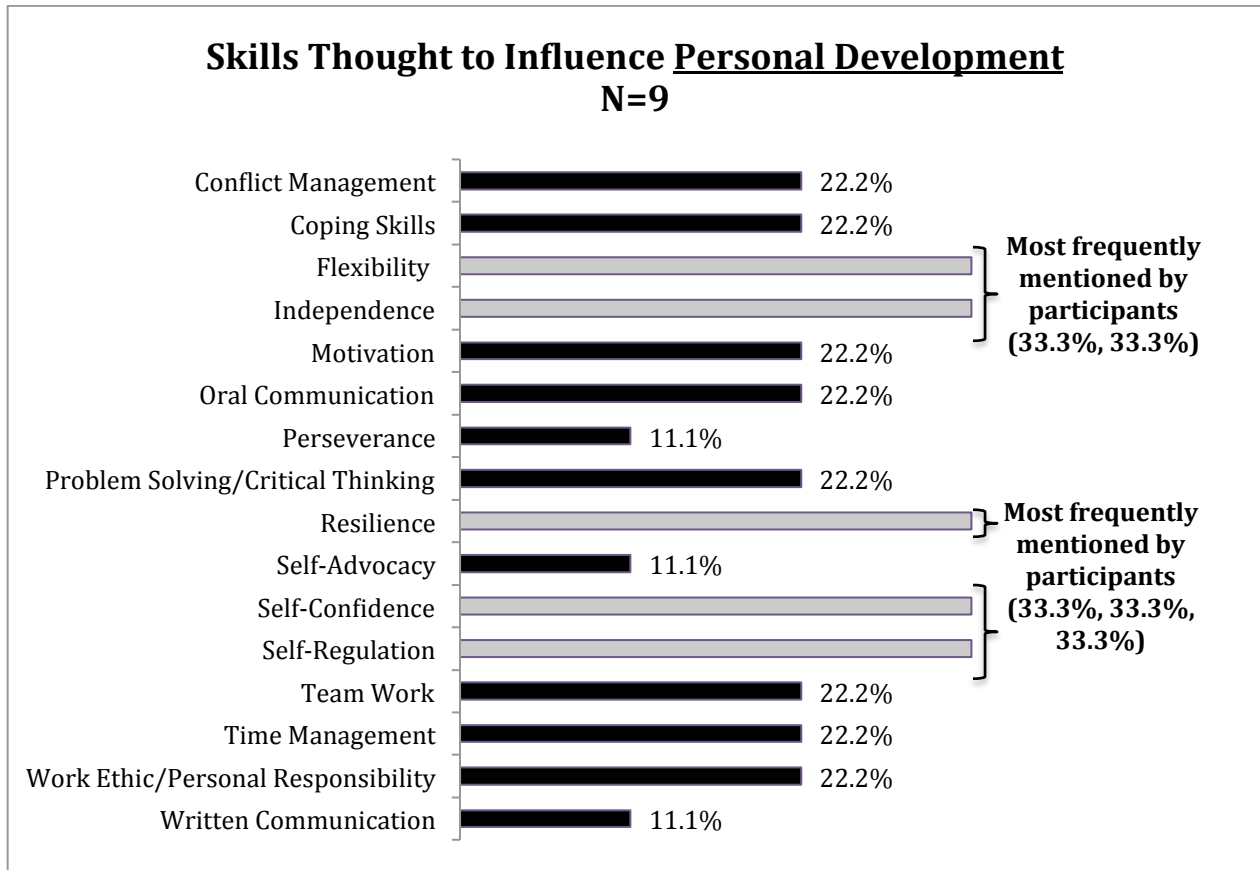
*Note*. This figure illustrates participant perceptions of skills that impact a learner's personal

development.

**Table 7**

*Skills Thought to Influence a Student's Personal Development*

| Non-Cognitive/Soft skills | Students (S) n=3 | Staff (Stf) n=2 | Faculty (F) n=2 | Administrators (A) n=2 | N= 9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conflict Management | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 22.2% |
| Coping Skills | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 33.3% | 50% | 0% | 50% | 33.3% |
| Independence | ✓ | | | ✓ ✓ | 3 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | **100%** | 33.3% |
| Motivation | ✓ | | | ✓ | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 22.2% |
| Oral Communication | ✓ | | | ✓ | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 22.2% |
| Perseverance* | | ✓ | | | 1 |
| | 0% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | ✓ | | ✓ | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 22.2% |
| Resilience | ✓ | ✓ ✓ | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | **100%** | 0% | 0% | 33.3% |
| Self-Advocacy | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |
| Self-Confidence | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | 3 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 50% | 50% | 33.3% |
| Self-Regulation | ✓ | ✓ ✓ | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | **100%** | 0% | 0% | 33.3% |
| Teamwork | ✓ | | ✓ | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 22.2% |
| Time Management | ✓ | | | ✓ | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 22.2% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | ✓ | | ✓ | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 22.2% |
| Written Communication | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 11.1% |

*Skill or trait not documented in the soft-skills list provided to participants*

The most frequently cited skills for personal development among participants included *flexibility* (33.3%), *independence* (33.3%), *resilience* (33.3%), *self-confidence* (33.3%), and *self-regulation* (33.3%). Notably, both administrators articulated *independence* as an impactful soft skill for personal development, while staff members both mentioned *resilience* and *self-regulation*.

I believe Adam (A1) saw personal development as the broadening of the way a person thinks, which I would call an expansion of one's personal sphere. Adam's (A1) version of personal development requires the ability to be flexible and to be open to communicating with others who may be different or share different opinions from you. Flexibility and having openness to communicating with others was seen to be especially important to actively participate in college settings where diversity can drive collective innovation, dialogue, and creativity. Adam (A1) explained,

> Umm, well flexibility. I think for personal you certainly have to be a, depending on where you come from, there are again, it is a very inclusive environment and you might come from a community that may not be as inclusive. So I think that, for me, I came from a really small town, so you know they were [a] very homophobic environment. So for me it was real education to come here and learn and be working with other people who had different opinions or whatever. So again, I found that really illuminating and what have you. So, I think you have to have some sort of flexibility, and of course if you're into artistic expression then you're open to debate and to trying to understand people and communicate with people, right. (Adam, A1)

The notion of building a social circle was again mentioned, this time as a means of wellness building that supports the development of the whole person. Adam (A1) saw the ability

to communicate with others who may think differently or lead a different lifestyle from you, as being open to "far greater friendships;" friendships that could expand beyond a learner's program cohort. He (A1) noted that creating this network of friends allows for students to "become more grounded as a person, not even just as a student, but as a person." He (A1) went on to express, "I think it gives them too, it gives them a distraction. 'Cause sometimes you do nothing but school, like it's heavy, right." Adam (A1) viewed communication as leading to building a strong network of support, which, in turn, would aide in the student experience, the development of the whole person, and also in the maintenance of mental health beyond the college environment.

Sharon's (S3) consideration of personal development appeared to include any aspect of growth that would impact the way one interacts in society. As such, she deemed all skills noted on the soft-skills list as impactful to personal growth. She noted,

> Well, I think it would just be positive. Like positive all the way through 'cause like I mentioned before it's, well, you said transferrable. You know, it's not just in one setting you know. All of these can be applied with personal relationships in the workplace, at school. So learning them or just growing up with them and having them engrained, you know, you're already [pause]. All of these, I almost want to say that all of these, it just, it makes you more, I don't know if the word, it's not personable, but it makes you more aware in general. Like for most of them because you're just, you're being aware of like the people around you and how you spend your time affects other people….So, in order to grow you have to have these skills in order to get anywhere. (Sharon, S3)

Similar to Adam (A1), personal development included a sense of personal awareness of how your soft skills can impact those around you along with how it impacts personal relationships with others.

Tessa (F2) believed that some skills are innately possessed, while others could be developed over time. She paused a moment while considering the soft-skills list, then shared, "Yeah, so the self-confidence piece," she continued to share her belief that this skill "can develop with time" (Tessa, F2). Then added, "I think if I was to say the three that jump out at me, because there are some that I believe are innate, but I also believe there are some that you need to have….Problem solving/critical thinking, teamwork, and work ethic and personal responsibility" (Tessa, F2). At this point in the interviews I truly believe participants began to dissect and consider how interrelated soft skills are to individual development, no matter which ones were seen as most needed.

Adam (A1) pondered aloud about whether there might be a correlation between the skills independence and motivation. He (A1) noted that, "I think that there should be more independence." However, he also articulated his uncertainty by saying, "I think that there should be, and I don't know if that's connected to motivation." He justified his thoughts and position regarding the link between the two skills by sharing a personal story about observations made in his own household.

> In my own children like they seem to have lack of motivation and then I would, I see that directly affects their independent action. If they're truly motivated to do something then they're going to find ways to get it done. (Adam, A1)

The idea is that motivation drives independent action and critical thinking to explore ways of accomplishing the task a person is motivated to complete. Laura (A2) also asserted the

necessity of understanding and learning independence to be able to learn and grow as a person. However, she attributed age, a lack of true understanding when it comes to skill terminology, and a generation of learners who were raised under different social circumstances as the reasoning for the varied skills levels. Laura (A2) explained,

> You're not allowed to let your kid go to the park all day long and then come back when the street lights go out. That was our generation. That's not her generation. So they don't feel any of these things.

Laura (A2) believed the current generation is less likely to have experienced situations where skills such as independence can be heightened prior to post-secondary entry, which, in part, is due to societal fear, a need to protect one's children, and society's view of acceptable parental supervision.

**Academic Development.** *Self-Confidence* (44.4%) was the most frequently mentioned by participants as the soft skill impacting a learner's academic development. The second most frequently cited soft skill in this category, with an eight-way tie, included an ability to be flexible (33.3%), problem-solve and critically think (33.3%), be resilient (33.3%), self-advocate (33.3%), self-regulate (33.3%), work effectively in teams (33.3%), manage one's time appropriately (33.3%), and communicate through written means (33.3%). Both staff members cited *flexibility* and *resilience* as a skill impacting academic development. Although 17 skills were mentioned to impact academic development, not all were elaborated on by participants. Figure 11 illustrates the soft skills that participants expressed as being impactful to academic development, while Table 8 provides a breakdown by stakeholder group. This is followed by my interpretation of why participants associated those skills with such development.

**Figure 11**

*Skills Thought to Influence Academic Development*
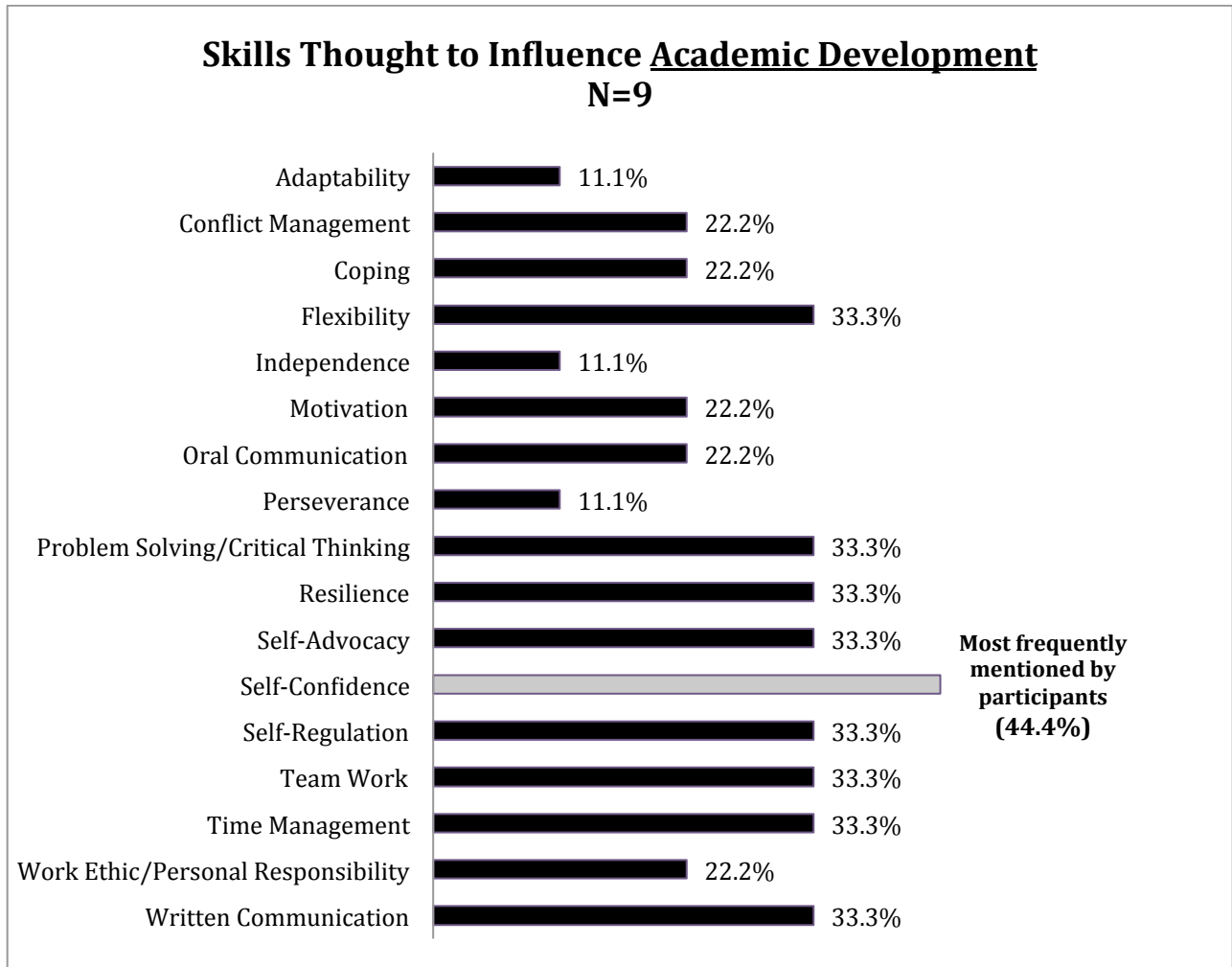
## Skills Thought to Influence <u>Academic Development</u>
### N=9

| Skill | Percentage |
|-------|-----------|
| Adaptability | 11.1% |
| Conflict Management | 22.2% |
| Coping | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | 33.3% |
| Independence | 11.1% |
| Motivation | 22.2% |
| Oral Communication | 22.2% |
| Perseverance | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | 33.3% |
| Resilience | 33.3% |
| Self-Advocacy | 33.3% |
| Self-Confidence | **Most frequently mentioned by participants (44.4%)** |
| Self-Regulation | 33.3% |
| Team Work | 33.3% |
| Time Management | 33.3% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | 22.2% |
| Written Communication | 33.3% |

*Note*. This figure illustrates participant perceptions of skills that impact a learner's academic development.

**Table 8**

*Skills Thought to Influence a Student's Academic Development*

| Non-Cognitive/Soft skills | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adaptability* | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Conflict Management | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Coping Skills | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Independence | | ✓ | | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Motivation | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Oral Communication | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Perseverance* | | | | ✓ | | | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | | 3 |
| | 66.7% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Resilience | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Self-Advocacy | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |
| Self-Confidence | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 50% | | **44.4%** |
| Self-Regulation | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | 3 |
| | 66.7% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Teamwork | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | | 3 |
| | 66.7% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Time Management | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | | 2 |
| | 66.7% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Written Communication | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |

*Skill or trait not documented in the soft-skills list provided to participants*

Wanda (Stf2) mentioned self-confidence as a skill that impacts academic development, yet, noted, "You can be as confident as all hell and still fail something." This pointed to self-confidence as being a factor that impacts academic development; however, not always in a way that demonstrates positive academic development. Wanda (Stf2) went on to discuss the skills *flexibility*, *resilience*, and an ability to *cope* with new and potentially devastating life experiences that an individual may become more aware of as they age. These skills were seen as greatly impacting academic success and development. Wanda (Stf2) suggested,

> It's how you're flexible, how you're resilient, how you're willing to cope with loss and I think that's the other thing too. We forget these 17, 18 year old students [pause] sometimes the closest thing they've lost to them is you know a pet, or if that, or a grandparent, right. And not that those things aren't hard, but life can throw a ton of crap at you. And in school while you're going through that, I think in academics is the biggest test to how you're going to deal with life. Because nothing is harder than having six exams in one week and then having a friend pass away or your car break down on your way to an exam. I mean there are a million different things that you can think of. Those awful things that you're like, no this can't happen at this moment. That's going to happen a lot in life. So I think this is like the first time that they really start to deal with that and their personal and academic kind of collide and those soft skills and strengthening them and building them is what can get them through it.

Wanda (Stf2) pointed to managing factors outside of core classroom work as being a part of holistic academic development. Students who enter a new academic environment need skills that will assist them in mentally managing life stressors, such as those that come with a different environment and new, sometimes distressing, life events.

On the other hand, Rachel (S2) saw self-confidence as a necessary skill for learners to communicate with their faculty members. Having an ability to communicate with her professors when she passes them in the hallway or when she requires assignment clarification was important for her to do without a display of fear. Rachel (S2) recognized the importance of communication for academic development and course work comprehension, but she also recognized it for networking with her professors for possible future job opportunities. Nonetheless, she (S2) explained, "not a lot of them [students] are comfortable like raising up their hand or talking up to their teachers regarding assignments or any questions about the course." Instead, Rachel (S2) shared with me that many of her student peers are more likely to seek guidance from their friends for assignment clarification. This is especially true for college degree students. Rachel (S2) noted that as a student who has experienced a diploma and a degree program at the college, her diploma program "had more people who were more confident and kind of seeking more like help [from their professors]." Though, Rachel (S2) said this with a caveat. She (S2) mentioned, as did Sharon (S3), during our dialogue that a classroom environment, such as how a professor manages their class and demonstrates approachability, will dictate how comfortable a student feels in speaking up in their classroom.

Adam (A1) discussed *self-confidence* and *self-advocacy* as the skills impacting academic development and an ability to ask for help. He explained,

> So if certainly they are struggling with something, whether they have accommodations or not, they need to be advocating and not be afraid to say, *hey, I'm having a lot of trouble with this*. And more times than not we appreciate that. We appreciate the students that have all these questions because the worst thing is you go up there, you explain okay this

is what, this is what the assignment is or this is what the project is….And then everyone

is just [pause] dead silence. (Adam, A1)

Adam (A1) clarified that asking questions was a sign for him that a student is listening

and is "somewhat engaged in what we're doing."

Nina (F1) made a distinction between teamwork and group work by noting, "So I don't

even know if I'd call that teamwork. I would think I would categorize that as group work. Or

kind of group development." Nina (F1) was referring to a similar effect of social circles where

members can positively motivate one another. She (F1) described group work as a core

collection of peers whom "tend to all want to achieve the level of the highest person in that

group." In essence, group members positively influence and inspire one another, "so everyone

tries to improve" (Nina, F1). Adam's (A1) personal story of his own college experience, as well

as Rachel's (S2) shared experiences, corroborate this idea of group development where a

person's academic peers act as motivators for the core collective. Adam (A1) recalled his first

year at college by explaining,

> What I found, at least for most of that year, was that they raised the bar. So then it's like
>
> maybe us young 18, 19 year olds were kind of farting around and these guys did their
>
> first project. And it's kind of like, whoa, like if that's what can be achieved, we got to
>
> sharpen our pencils and really pick up our pants and really go at it. And then as the year
>
> progressed, certain students became known as being good at one thing or another and
>
> then they started to, the mature students started to spread out between everyone else and
>
> the whole year kind of got lifted up from that experience.

In this case, a group distinction is made where friendships are not a requirement of its

membership. Instead, association to this group is achieved through a shared goal for attaining a

particular standard of work. In Adam's (A1) story, seeing the potential of others had motivated him to join the groups he believed would elevate him.

In Rachel's (S2) situation, "the ability to work well with others" was needed for both personal and academic development. Rachel (S2) acknowledged the importance of treating group members as a team to ensure mutual respect, equitable work distribution, future opportunities to work with the same group, and to avoid "setbacks that could effect you not submitting your work on time." Rachel (S2) shared an example of her experience of conflict in a group "we were in a group of four and we had a conflict because a person wasn't treating our group as a team." Rachel (S2) viewed teamwork as a skill that included knowing how to approach a problem in a diplomatic way. Notably, this required skills that impact interactions, some of which included those mentioned by participants for this category, such as problem solving/critical thinking, adaptability, flexibility, strong work ethic/self-regulation, and taking personal responsibility for a person's actions.

Written communication was also asserted by Adam (A1) as a skill that is impactful and important for academic development. He (A1) talked about his wish for cursive writing to be taught to learners, but also recognized, "most things are done on computer now," which acknowledged that students might not see the direct relevance for having the skill. Nonetheless, Adam (A1) raised the point that when learners apply to jobs that require a paper application or when they need to complete a contract, he is often unable to read them. Moreover, Tessa (F2) noted that written and oral communications are fundamental to the way learners need to develop academically. At least in the program in which she (F2) teaches as work in her humanities and social sciences field requires proficiency in oral and written communication for professional and effective conduct and interaction with others.

***Soft Skills and its Impact on a Student's Engagement With Their College (Academic and Social)***

The type of skills thought to impact a learner's engagement with their college varied among participants and included *adaptability* (11.1%), *coping* (22.2%)*, independence* (33.3%)*, oral communication* (44.4%)*, problem solving/critical thinking* (11.1%)*, motivation* (44.4%)*, resilience* (11.1%)*, self-advocacy* (33.3%)*, self-confidence* (77.8%)*, self-regulation* (11.1%)*, time management* (22.2%)*,* and *written communication* (22.2%). *Self-confidence* (77.8%) was the most frequently cited by participants. Within the participant stakeholder groups, both staff members cited *motivation* and *self-advocacy* and all faculty and administrator participants mentioned *oral communication* and *self-confidence*. Soft skills articulated by participants were said to impact a learner's ability or desire to attend events, to seek help or institutional resources, and to create social circles. Figure 12 graphically depicts the soft skills participants believe impact student engagement, while Table 9 provides a breakdown by stakeholder group.

**Figure 12**

*Skills Thought to Influence Student Engagement*
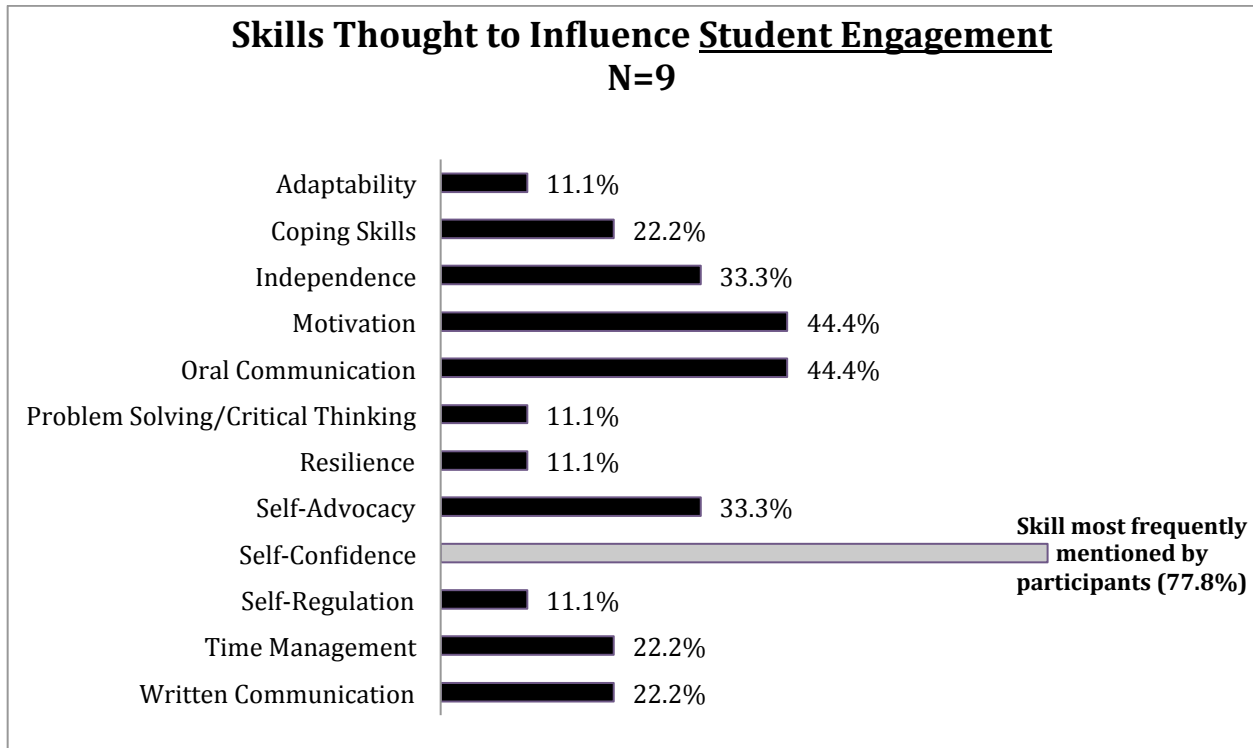


*Note*. This figure illustrates participant perceptions of skills that impact a student's engagement

with their post-secondary institution.

**Table 9**

*Skills Thought to Influence Student Engagement*

| Non-Cognitive/Soft skills | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adaptability* | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Coping Skills | | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 50% | | 22.2% |
| Independence | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | | 3 |
| | 66.7% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Motivation | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 4 |
| | 66.7% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 44.4% |
| Oral Communication | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 4 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | **100%** | | **100%** | | 44.4% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | | | | | | | | ✓ | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 50% | | 11.1% |
| Resilience | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Self-Advocacy | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | 3 |
| | 0% | | | **100%** | | 50% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Self-Confidence | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 7 |
| | 66.7% | | | 50% | | **100%** | | **100%** | | **77.8%** |
| Self-Regulation | | ✓ | | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Time Management | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | | | 2 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Written Communication | | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 22.2% |

*Skill or trait not documented in the soft-skills list provided to participants*

**Reasons for Disengagement.** My interview with Wanda (Stf2) provided context pertaining to the study site and why students at this particular college might not fully engage with their school. Wanda (Stf2) called the college a "commuter school" as she explained that "students are coming in, they are going to class, they are going home." She (Stf2) spoke further to the diversity of the student population by discussing varied home-life circumstances and the challenges to engage with one's school when also attempting to juggle it with multiple personal

commitments. Wanda (Stf2) explained, "they're doing homework, and they're trying to balance a social life still. They're trying to work, some of them. Some of them have children." The balancing of such dynamic life responsibilities, Wanda (Stf2) suggested, requires time management and life-management skills to help learners "effectively prioritize" work, school, and life commitments.

**Academic Impact.** Wanda (Stf2) highlighted that attending college is a time when many learners are away from the peer group they have known since grade school. As a result, a greater need for self-confidence is likely necessary to form new social circles, to approach professors, or to feel comfortable in raising a hand in class. She (Stf2) explained that, "not facilitating that connection with the professor, or not going to their office hours because you don't have the confidence or [you] think your question is stupid" could have negative implications on academic engagement. Participants also spoke of having "the confidence to go to your professor" (Adam, A1), and "having the confidence to be like, *yeah I need help*" (Rachel, S2) when clarification is needed. According to Laura (A2), students are not necessarily familiar with how to ask for help, which then translates into their behaviour in the workforce. She (A2) believes that learners who have inhibition or who lack confidence are in fear of the unknown. She (A2) explained that "at the beginning of the semester" many students will "come with a buddy" to her department "because they don't want to go by themselves" (Laura, A2). Sharon (S3) elaborated on why she felt that "being able to ask for help is one of the most important things." She (S3) continued by saying, "Because you might be able to read on your own and study on your own, but if you get stuck and you can't ask for help, then you can't get anywhere."

Sharon (S3) admitted that she still struggles with self-confidence. She (S3) expressed her fear of confrontation with others, which she revealed can sometimes make it hard for her to

approach faculty members. She (S3) discussed with me how many students miss class or never approach their instructor because of fear, a lack of self-confidence, or mental health challenges that impact their attendance and, or, self-confidence. She shared her own experience with me by explaining,

> I missed a class, which I was trying so hard not to do. 'Cause I still struggle with like self-confidence and like confrontation. I just, in my head it's like, I missed class, the teacher's going to be mad. Like I'm going to come to class the next day and she's going to lecture me and be like, why didn't you come to class….But I walked into class and I was just like, 'I'm sorry I missed class you know, I had like scheduling at work. There was a problem with that.' And she was like, *oh it's no problem.* (Sharon, S3)

Sharon (S3) viewed receptive professors as individuals who can build confidence and increase approachability. Self-confidence was also mentioned by participants in tandem with other skills. For example, Tessa (F2), Nina (F1), and Laura (A2) all spoke about the interconnectedness and the impact that self-confidence, oral communication, and having an ability to self-advocate can have on a learner's academic success. This was similar to findings outlined in other areas of this study, such as the association and impact of self-confidence and self-advocacy on academic development. Tessa (F2) explained,

> So, for written and oral communication there might be ways to express something in Spanish let's say, and we just don't have the word for it [in English]. And so sometimes it limits how students can express themselves, which might have an impact on confidence and so forth. So, public speaking that we ask students to do in classrooms, for example; public speaking is like the greatest fear most people have and yet here we are asking them to do that.

The idea that lacking a certain proficiency in language, I interpreted as also including the use of local linguistic idioms, which would place these students in situations that make it increasingly difficult to participate in academic assessments that are already known to be stressful. Laura (A2) noted that learners, even those seemingly proficient in the dominant language, are fearful that they "might say the wrong thing," which applies to academic and social settings. Nina (F1) explained, "if they need to do something by themselves, they need to go advocate for themselves or get tutoring or something like that." Noting that students need the skills to be able to seek out the appropriate resources for their success. However, although self-confidence was largely noted by participants as a skill learners need to seek clarification and resources, motivation was also revealed as a contributor to institutional engagement.

As confident as Kamala (S1) had been throughout the interview and in the majority of the examples she shared with me, she also revealed to me that she did not seek resources during her first year of university. When I asked her why, she (S1) explained, "I think I also felt pretty part-time there, even though I was taking a full course load." This to me illustrated a person who felt demotivated and disconnected, which impacts learner confidence, which then could impact a learner's ability to self-advocate. The ability to self-advocate was raised multiple times by participants, especially when discussing the importance and need for learners with disabilities to engage with their school and gain access to resources. Wanda (Stf2) again spoke of the college's role in aiding students in their success, development, and engagement. She (Stf2) acknowledged in our discussion that segments of the learner population have sensory challenges and spoke of the college's responsibility in making its environment more sensory friendly. For example, adopting quiet spaces and dimmed lighting to promote a more welcoming atmosphere for learner engagement.

**Social Impact.** Kamala (S1) shared her belief that students in her program are "by nature" in possession of "a higher sense of confidence," and, in turn, are "comfortable putting ourselves out in public speaking ways that I know probably the majority of the population aren't comfortable with." She (S1) went on to assert,

> Confidence really helps us to take advantage of these social engagement things that are going on at the school because we are not worried about perceptions of whether people think it's strange that we're there. Like going to events alone for instance. (Kamala, S1)

Her confidence has created opportunities to experience the college environment in many ways, as she is not inhibited by the judgement of others. Her (S1) engagement with the school is based on her personal desire to attend an event and does not require the accompaniment of others. Nonetheless, Kamala (S1) acknowledged that her level of confidence is not typical of college learners and that from her experiences interacting with other students, she finds those who suffer from particular mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, may have lower levels of confidence, which, in turn might "hold people back from taking advantage of all of these things." As with other areas of this study, I note that participants spoke again of skills working in tandem for successful student outcomes.

### Soft Skills and its Impact on a Student's Decisions/Ability to Remain in School and Persist to Graduation

Participants named a variety of soft skills they perceived to influence a student's decision-making process and ability to remain in school. Skills such as *problem solving/critical thinking* (66.7%), *conflict management* (44.4%), *motivation* (44.4%), *resilience* (44.4%), *time management* (44.4%), *work ethic/personal responsibility* (44.4%), and *written communication* (44.4%) were among the most frequently cited factors impacting student retention and

persistence. Staff participants both cited *flexibility, resilience, self-advocacy*, and *work ethic/personal responsibility*. Faculty participants both named *motivation, teamwork*, and *time management*. While, all administrator participants mentioned *problem solving/critical thinking*. The skills mentioned were viewed as contributors to a student's decision-making process that I interpreted as being *controlled* or *uncontrolled*. Figure 13 illustrates the skills participants believed impact a student's decision-making process and ability to remain in school and persist to graduation, while Table 10 provides a breakdown of responses by stakeholder group. My interpretation is then followed.

**Figure 13**

*Skills Thought to Influence Decision-Making and Retention*
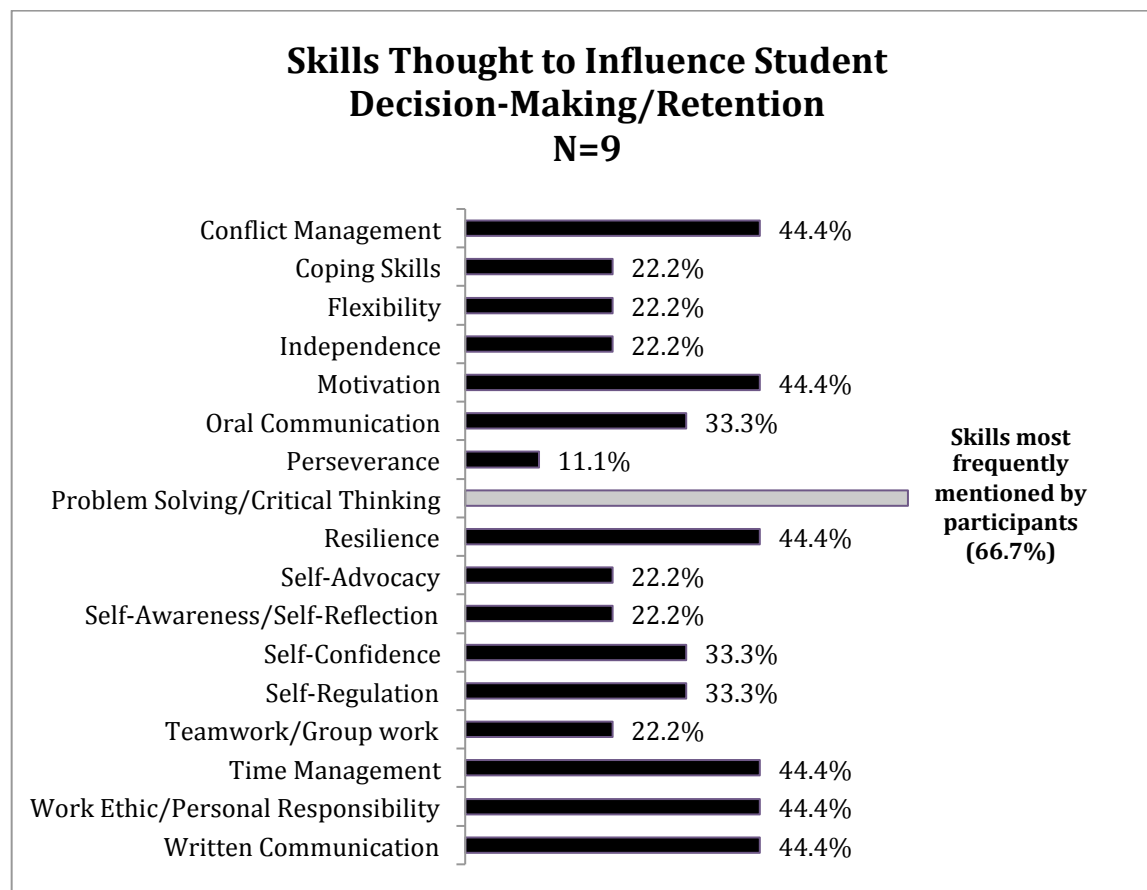


**Skills Thought to Influence Student Decision-Making/Retention**
**N=9**

| Skill | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Conflict Management | 44.4% |
| Coping Skills | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | 22.2% |
| Independence | 22.2% |
| Motivation | 44.4% |
| Oral Communication | 33.3% |
| Perseverance | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | Skills most frequently mentioned by participants (66.7%) |
| Resilience | 44.4% |
| Self-Advocacy | 22.2% |
| Self-Awareness/Self-Reflection | 22.2% |
| Self-Confidence | 33.3% |
| Self-Regulation | 33.3% |
| Teamwork/Group work | 22.2% |
| Time Management | 44.4% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | 44.4% |
| Written Communication | 44.4% |

Note. This figure illustrates participant perceptions of skills that impact a learner's decision-making and ability to persist to graduation.

**Table 10**

*Skills Thought to Influence a Student Decision-Making and Persistence*

| Non-Cognitive/Soft skills | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conflict Management | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 50% | | 44.4% |
| Coping Skills | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 22.2% |
| Flexibility | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Independence | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Motivation | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | **100%** | | 0% | | 44.4% |
| Oral Communication | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Perseverance* | | | | ✓ | | | | | | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 6 |
| | 66.7% | | | 50% | | 50% | | **100%** | | **66.7%** |
| Resilience | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 50% | | 44.4% |
| Self-Advocacy | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | **100%** | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Self-Awareness/Self-Reflection* | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | | | 2 |
| | 66.7% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Self-Confidence | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 0% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |
| Self-Regulation | ✓ | | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 50% | | 50% | | 33.3% |
| Teamwork/Group Work | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | **100%** | | 0% | | 22.2% |
| Time Management | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | 50% | | **100%** | | 0% | | 44.4% |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | 4 |
| | 33.3% | | | **100%** | | 50% | | 0% | | 44.4% |

| Written | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication | 66.7% | | | 50% | | 50% | | 0% | | 44.4% |

*Skill or trait not documented in the soft-skills list provided to participants*

**Controlled.** I categorized controlled decision-making as occurring when soft-skills levels are moderate to high in skills that act to foster a learner's ability to actively seek information, clarity, adjust, and cope when and where necessary. Adam (A1) captured this sentiment when speaking of the vital role that soft skills play in a learner's ability to rationalize and avoid impulsive decisions. Adam (A1) explained,

> I would say that they [soft skills] are crucial in terms of [pause] if that was the apex that you wanted to go from, whether you are going to quit or not, I think it's all the soft-skills side that's going to keep you from making that rash decision. And it may not be the wrong decision. You may be in the wrong discipline, right.

It was telling from Adam's (A1) passage that *controlled* decision-making does not mean that a learner will always make the decision to persist to graduation. Instead, *controlled* decision-making reflects a student who has command over their decision to remain or leave the institution based on an informed assessment and a well thought-out plan. The plan is often made with purpose and through active engagement with their school, including their school's resources.

Carol (Stf1) demonstrated how actively seeking support and utilizing the school's resources allows for controlled decision-making to occur and might also work toward the development of soft skills. Carol (Stf1) provided a snapshot into the advisor-student relationship with an example of the incremental process that she uses to help students to develop their skills and to make informed decisions. In the following passage, Carol (Stf1) talked about a typical interaction she might have when a student comes into her office indicating a desire to withdraw from their program. Carol (Stf1) asserted,

171

And I always say to them right up front if you want to withdraw I will sign this form and you're done. But I feel that part of our job in that experience is to be able to go through all of these things. For me to be the advocate of, what solutions have you looked at? Who have you spoken to? What self-advocacy have you done? What things are you willing to do to change this? Have you looked at how this is going to impact you in the future for graduating? So you're thinking this is it; I can't persevere. And I'm saying 'man you're going to have to pick up one extra course in the summer, that's it.' And so, a part of our job is to go through all of these things, how have you tried to persevere before they do it. And I would say, I'm going to guess about 50% of the time they change their mind because they haven't thought about all of that. And it's been about a knee-jerk, you know, baby in the bath water situation. I failed this course; therefore I have to quit everything. So I think having these soft skills, or having somebody sit down and work through conflict management, how might you resolve this issue with your teacher? Self-confidence, okay you failed this one thing, look at how well you're doing in all of your other classes. Or, so this one person didn't like your piece of art; who cares? That person happens to be grading you on this, the next time you'll do something else with a different teacher and it may be rock solid and you need to persevere.

Carol (Stf1) appeared to create an environment that replicates the inner workings of a brain that is highly reflective and able to think critically. Her ability to raise critical questions and act as a sounding board for her students appeared to assist in student reflection and cultivate possibilities. However, as Wanda (Stf2) had pointed out, "one of those big things was knowing our office because we need them to come in." As such, the type of advisor-student interaction is only possible when students access the support. Moreover, as Carol (Stf1) mentioned,

anecdotally 50% of the students she advises before withdrawing remain enrolled, which spoke to a necessity for advisor-student connections, reflective practice, and an understanding of the underlying challenges a student is facing so that learners are match with the appropriate resources.

Student participant Kamala (S1) spoke of skills she used when making her decision to leave her first post-secondary experience. The skills and process she undertook to ultimately make the decision to leave her university highlights an example of *controlled* decision-making. Kamala (S1) explained,

> You know I technically dropped out of a university. Because I'd gone in for language skills that I had thought coming out of my gap year that [is] what I wanted to do with my life. And then I think I used my like self-regulation skills and critical-thinking skills to realize that that wasn't where I wanted to go.

Kamala's (S1) self-awareness of the role self-regulation and critical thinking played in her decision-making process illustrated the reflective nature of *controlled* decision-making. Kamala (S1) was fully aware that leaving her first post-secondary program was considered dropping out of school. However, instead of seeing it as failure, she was able to critically consider her options through reflection, and as noted earlier, by seeking insight from others. Kamala (S1) painted a type of methodical process that aided her ability to reimagine her purpose and adapt, where necessary, her goals and next steps. Self-awareness was not a soft skill noted on the provided soft-skills list for participants; however, it was a factor mentioned by two of the three student participants. Notably, these two student participants were also the ones who travelled, spoke to others, and made the decision to leave their university programs before entering their college program.

**Uncontrolled.** On the other hand, lacking particular soft skills was recognized as a contributor to decision-making processes that are *uncontrolled.* When it came to the topic of student persistence, Adam (A1) noted that quitting school can be a "very immature decision" that "lacks foresight" in the absence of soft skills. He went on to say that 'quitting' "lacks a lot of critical thinking. It's a very emotional decision without a lot of intellectual thought behind it" (Adam, A1). What Adam (A1) was describing was the notion of *uncontrolled* decision-making, which I surmised as decision-making that leads to learner outcomes which lack the sometimes necessary intervention by a student to become informed, take appropriate action, or communicate a need, which, in turn, could negatively impact the learner's ability to control whether or not they remain in school. Ultimately, soft skills act as the tools needed to help make informed decisions.

Figure 14 illustrates a graphical depiction of *controlled* and *uncontrolled* decision-making and probable outcomes. *Controlled* appears more methodical or organized where the learner can easily access and draw upon the appropriate skills needed in the moment to aid in their decision-making process. While, the graphic of *uncontrolled* illustrates low levels and an unorganized set of skills that make access to the appropriate skill(s) more difficult to retrieve and utilize, which limits the learner's ability to appropriately investigate available options or resources.

**Figure 14**

*Controlled and Uncontrolled Decision-Making*
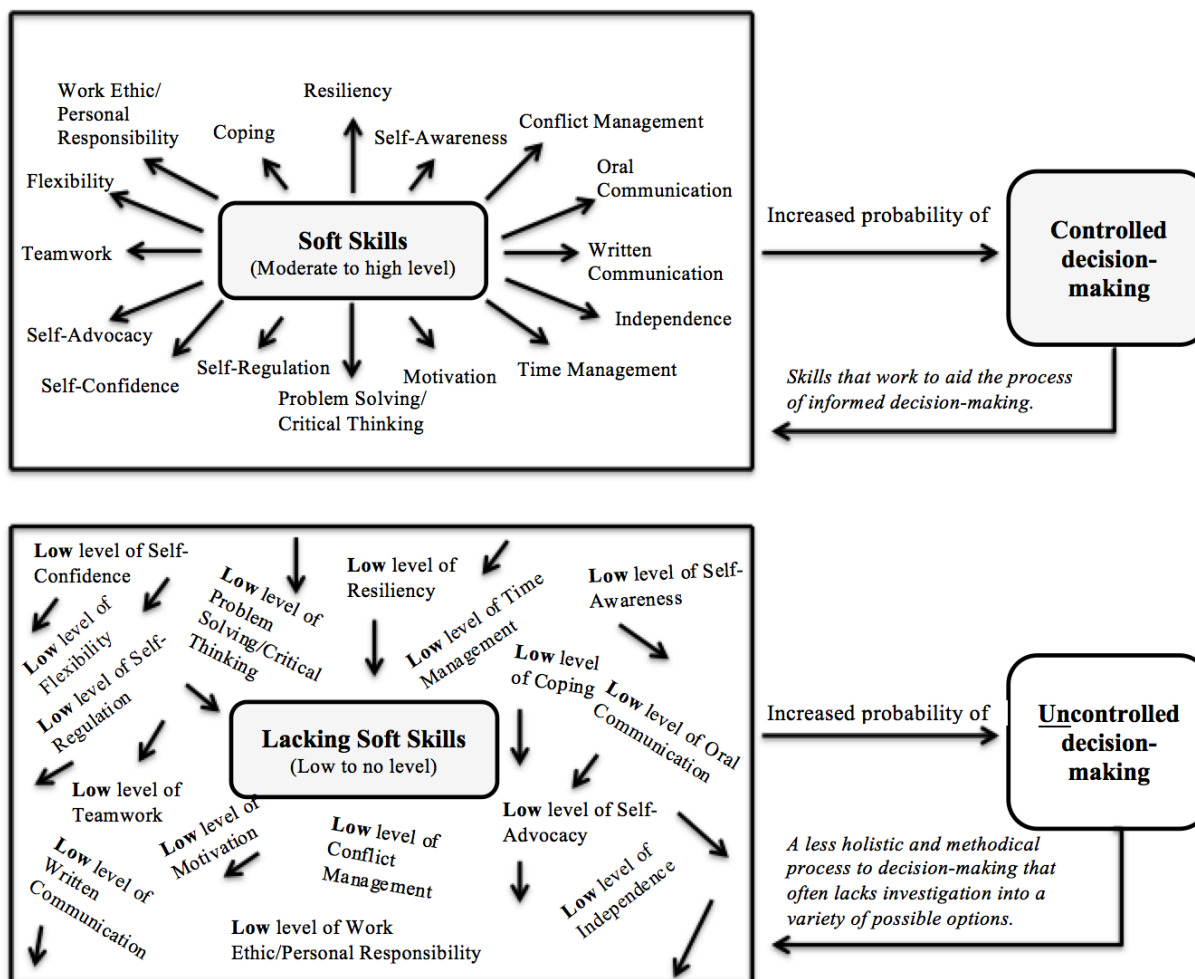


Note. This figure illustrates controlled and uncontrolled decision-making and probable outcomes.

Through my conversations with participants, all soft skills noted on the soft-skills list were mentioned by at least one participant illustrating that each skill can be used in different ways to impact a learner's trajectory in their studies, including their decision-making process as to whether or not to remain enrolled. Moreover, the variety of skills that were mentioned showed learner post-secondary experiences as being multi-faceted and, as such, requiring different skills

to address challenges, or to maximize learner opportunities during a learner's post-secondary journey.

      **Challenges.** Participants spoke of the realities and stressors that many learners face during post-secondary life. Factors included classroom and social dynamics, outside familial influence and responsibilities, a fear of college expectations, or of the perceived difficulties they will face when contending with the 'new' academic rigor of post-secondary studies. Faculty member Tessa (F2) spoke about classroom dynamics, and, that as a faculty member, how she is not always privy to the social dynamics of her students within her classroom. Tessa (F2) pointed to items such as group dynamics and bullying. She (F2) noted the potential effects of social media on today's learners, as it has allowed bullying to more easily extend beyond classroom walls. Tessa (F2) shared,

> Because as you have here the coping skills or even conflict management. Whether it be conflict that they're having with individuals within the program or the school itself, we can't ignore the fact that bullying and cyber-bullying and so forth; the use of social media has. And so we, if they're not able to manage that and overcome that, with the coping skills being able to do that; that alone can hinder you. Because then it trickles into all the other aspects that you talked about in terms of self-confidence, self-regulation, right. The motivation isn't there; I don't want to be a part of that person's team.

    An inability to cope or address the challenge at-hand, as Tessa (F2) noted, "trickles into all the other aspects." It permeates into other areas of soft skills with the capacity to impact a learner's confidence, focus, well-being, and could lead to what Carol (Stf1) suggested as the self-questioning of one's place within the institution.

Nina (F1) elaborated on the idea of social dynamics, group work, and reiterated the importance that social circles within one's program can have on a learner's motivation to stay in their program. She asserted,

> I'm going to go back to the group work again. Being in that group, 'cause there's group norms that are developed. Like I just see it so much in a very positive way when they have their group and a very negative way when they don't have that social circle. (Nina, F1)

Social groups act to uplift and motivate their members. Nina (F1) shared her observations of how much more motivated her daughter is when surrounded by supportive classmates. Nina (F1) asserted, "She's someone, her learning style; she needs to work in a group. She needs to be motivated by the group; otherwise she's not going to be that motivated." Nina (F1) noted that she has witnessed this characteristic in many of her college students and praised colleges for their often-smaller classroom sizes compared to what a student might encounter in a university environment by explaining:

> So I think a strength that we have is the small classroom sizes. That has come back time and time and time again from our program reviews. I would say the number one and number two strengths that we see, and I've done four program reviews between degree and diploma, so a lot of research has gone into that, is that they say connection with faculty and small classrooms. Yep, those are the two.

Nina (F1) classified college learners as a population that are "generally not strong independent learners;" adding that, "I think they do need that group thing." Moreover, her comments about the likeability of small class sizes and the need for learners to build relationships with their faculty members coincide with assertions from the student participants of

this study who spoke of the small class sizes and approachability of faculty members as helping to create a sense of community. Rachel (S2) speaks to this in the following excerpt about her experience at the college,

> The teachers, like professors were very welcoming and able to kind of like guide me through. And like classmates, since I was in a college community, the school classroom size is fairly small compared to universities. So, I think that kind of like helped my experience, like find friends that were like able to help me throughout the assignments and like all of the other school stuff that's going on.

> Rachel's (S2) reflection on the welcoming experience she felt, she believed, impacted her academically and in her decision-making process when withdrawing from her diploma program and choosing to attend the same institution to complete a degree program. As noted earlier, her familiarity, comfort, and kinship with the school influenced her decision to stay, albeit in a different program.

> The low number of students per class presents opportunity, and is the catalyst for the development of social connections. However, remaining in a program that requires group work was still noted as a challenge for learners lacking the skills to find, form, and thrive in group structures. Nina (F1) discussed the turmoil of one of her students when faced with joining a group as a part of course work. She shared,

> He doesn't know anybody in the class. Like if I ask him [pause] when he has made it so far as to get into the group project part, and I say, 'find three other people to work with a group.' And he says, *I don't know anybody*. And he'll email the class and they'll all be like, *I don't know him.* (Nina, F1)

In Nina's (F1) example, although the student was able to attempt communication with their classmates, there was a sense of rejection that can have a multitude of effects on the learner. The words "*I don't know him*," sounded as though it provided the learner with a feeling of isolation and estrangement from their school. Although Nina (F1) did not share whether or not this particular student remained in his program or the institution, her observation of his struggles to find his place in her class felt powerful. I reflected on Nina's (F1) words, "when he has made it so far," then seemingly [the student] hit a roadblock when arriving at a point in the curriculum when group work became a part of the assessment criteria. Student participant Sharon (S3) shared what she felt might be going through a student's mind as they navigate challenges in their post-secondary journey, especially when trying to achieve the grades for success and remain enrolled. She explained,

> You know if you're putting in the work and you think what you're doing is like, you're doing the best that you can and you're not getting results, you might be like, you know, I'm doing all I can. If I can't [pause] like if this is my all and it's not good enough then why am I here? (Sharon, S3)

Sharon (S3) highlighted the stagnant progress that students can feel when their perceived effort toward higher grades do not match the results they receive. In turn, the effort that yields little return impacts the learner's confidence and desire to remain enrolled.

Sharon (S3) also spoke about students who remove themselves from situations they feel pose conflict; actions that she admittedly would frequently take in the past to avoid confrontation. Sharon (S3) explained,

> Cause I can't improve myself, or they don't know that something's wrong and they think, well my written communication is just fine. I don't know why this teacher is, you know,

giving me a bad mark. Which, might be like another thing if there is a lot of conflict and whether or not that's conflict that the person is creating or they're being met with conflict and they don't know how to deal with it. Or they don't know if they [pause] if talking to someone doesn't fix it, or bringing it up to like a higher position or whoever and that doesn't fix it. They might just feel, you know, I don't want to deal with this or I don't have the time to deal with it, or the energy to deal with it. And so, they just leave to remove themselves from the situation because it's not worth it to them.

This was similar to Laura's (A2) point raised about learners not believing their voice will be heard and retreating rather than self-advocating and addressing the matter head on. Nonetheless, participants spoke about the need for students to utilize skills like resilience to push through challenges and bounce back from failure. Kamala (S1) spoke about the "high stress kind of program" that she is in and the need for her classmates and herself to exhibit high levels of resilience to survive in a program that demands a lot of time and energy. She explained,

Long hours and high expectations and you need a lot of personal drive, which is exhausting. And so, I think that resilience is super important for us and I think for college students in general having that forward thinking about your future and knowing that once you get through these years, it will have been worth it. (Kamala, S1)

Similarly, staff participants Carol (Stf1) and Wanda (Stf2) expressed the importance of resilience when faced with disappointment or failure. Carol (Stf1) explained that you need, "the persistence and the resilience to say*, okay I got an 'F,' but that's not the end of the world because I can still go forward*. So all of those things come under that ability to persevere; that bounce." While Wanda (Stf2) expressed, "I want to say is resilience," then added, "If you can't fail and get back up, I think a lot of students, they give up." All three statements reflect the

normalcy of encountering challenges or some form of failure during the course of post-secondary life; however, a student's ability to 'bounce' back from it will impact their likelihood of staying or leaving.

### *Suggestions to Improve Soft Skills in College Learners*

Prior to addressing any ideas of what could be done to improve soft skills, I gathered a sense of whether or not participants believed that action should be taken to improve these skills. Participants were in agreement that action on the part of the college is needed to improve soft skills among learners, with three participants asserting that colleges are in an obligatory position to address this type of skill development.

**Whether to Improve Soft Skills in Learners.** Administrator Adam (A1) discussed the role of institutions in building soft skills as being essential in a world that continues to experience shifts in the economy and in the way that people conduct business and interact on a global scale. Adam (A1) explained that it is "not just technology, but it's technology and the culture's changing, and there's shifts in economics; there's shifts in sort of global thinking." He (A1) fortified the idea that students need to understand and learn how to be flexible and adapt to various changes that occur in life, the workforce, and society as a whole. Carol (Stf1) was similar in her view of the role that colleges have in preparing learners for an evolving world and workforce. She (Stf1) asserted that the college's function is one that teaches applied skills that are intended to prepare learners for the workforce on a variety of levels, both cognitive and non-cognitive. Carol (Stf1) shared,

> I think it should be taught. I think it should be. If we, if part of what we are doing, okay
> so let's go back to, what is a college about? What do we do? A university is theoretical
> learning; a college is practical applied learning. So if we are teaching practical applied

skills for the work world, which in my mind is what a college is doing, we are not just

[pause]. Nobody comes to college just for the fun; maybe they do, just for the fun of it.

The intent is that I will graduate from here and get a job. That's always why you would be

here, except for the people that do it just for fun. So if I'm saying that I want to teach you

everything that you need to know in order to be able to be successful, by your definition

at a later point in time, part of what I need to teach you is how to do that.

In Carol's (Stf1) purview, the bedrock of the institution (colleges) is to identify the items

that students will need for life beyond the school, which, in part, includes soft skills. The belief is

that soft skills are a focal part of productive interaction with others in an evolving world,

workforce, and life in general.

Staff member Wanda (Stf2), also agreed that colleges should take action in the

development of soft skills in their learners. She (Stf2) responded, "Absolutely. Oh yeah and

maybe at that point it's faculty." Wanda (Stf2) saw faculty members as being vital in helping to

build these skills among learners. She (Stf2) saw faculty members as having the greatest access

to learners, and an equally as significant influence on them. The level of influence by faculty

members was recognized by Tessa (F2) who explained her belief that a level of consciousness is

necessary among faculty members to recognize the impact that their actions and the

demonstration of these skills can have on students. She (F2) explained, "I have to demonstrate

the skill set so that they then themselves feel comfortable enough to engage in what is

happening. If I don't practice it, how can I expect my students to do it?" Tessa (F2) pointed to the

integration and modeling of soft skills within the classroom as an impactful action that can help

or hinder skills development through experiential practice.

Nina (F1) concurred that the college should do something about improving soft skills among learners. She (F1) was unequivocal in her response when she said, "Yeah. So yes. One hundred percent. No question." Nina (F1) spoke specifically about her program faculty cluster and how as a group,

> We are fairly forward-thinking in terms of how we structure the classes and work collaborative[ly] as a group; like as a faculty group. We have identified many times over the importance of these soft skills. So one of the courses that we have in the program….is a course basically all about soft skills….we do things on time management, we do a cultural diversity section, they do some personality testing, we talk about emotional intelligence.

Nina (F1) went on to discuss how over time the course moved from an elective class to one that is mandatory for students in certain programs to complete. Her (F1) observations of the course, "is that students either do really well or really poorly. Like they either get 80 or 50 or fail. There's not a lot in the middle. So they either get it or they don't," which might shed light on the level and type of skills students possess as they enter this class. From a learner perspective, Rachel (S2) spoke about a course she took early in her program that incorporated various soft skills that she was able to incorporate and further develop through placement opportunities as part of her studies. My conversation with Rachel (S2) brought about similarities with Tessa's (F2) idea of 'modelling' skill behaviour in the classroom for learners to witness particular soft skills in action and gradually become comfortable practicing the skill with others in a safe space. Rachel (S2) spoke of her experience on a field placement where she had the opportunity to view leadership skills taught in the classroom and demonstrated in the workforce. She explained,

Like not right now, but in the past three years, [I] had placement. So, with that leadership

course I was able to see what those leadership, umm, leadership roles were in the real

world, because I was able to see like, 'oh, his or her skills are like this and that

leadership.' (Rachel, S2)

Rachel (S2) was able to connect classroom pedagogy with workforce practices. She (S2)

attributed the first semester course that taught her to begin to question how to utilize particular

skills in the workplace for the reason she believed that something should be done by the college

to ensure all learners are provided with opportunities in some way to develop soft skills.

Kamala (S1) responded to the question of whether soft skills should be improved in

college learners with a definitive "Yes!" Participants then spoke of ways they felt soft skills

could be improved amongst today's college learners.

**Ways to Improve Soft Skills.**  Participants provided suggestions for improving soft

skills in college learners that can be categorized in six major areas. Suggestions included the

integration, and, or, implementation of:

1.  soft-skills pedagogy into program curriculum or general elective courses.

2.  pre-arrival activities for students aimed at soft-skills development.

3.  institution-wide awareness campaigns and exposure.

4.  soft-skills development as a student service (i.e. like counselling).

5.  workshops that focus on soft-skills development.

6.  mentorship programs for learners.

Figure 15 illustrates the various ways participants suggested that soft skills could be

developed in college learners, while Table 11 provides a breakdown by stakeholder group. All

students, staff, and faculty participants suggested that soft-skills pedagogy be embedded in

program curriculum or general elective classes. Moreover, all staff also suggested pre-arrival activities, while all faculty members also suggested an institution-wide awareness campaign and mentorship development program. Both administrators named mentorship as a suggested intervention for developing soft skills.

**Figure 15**

*Ways to Develop Soft Skills*



**Suggested Ways to Develop Soft Skills in Learners**
**N=9**

| | |
|---|---|
| Embed soft-skills pedagogy into program curriculum or elective classes | **Most frequently suggested (88.9%)** |
| Implement pre-arrival activities for learners | 33.3% |
| Create an institution-wide awareness campaign and exposure to soft skills | 55.6% |
| Offer soft-skills development as a student service | 11.1% |
| Offer soft-skills development as a workshop | 11.1% |
| Implement mentorship programs for learner development | 44.4% |

Note. This figure illustrates participant suggested ways to develop soft skills in learners.

**Table 11**

*Participant Suggestions for Developing Soft Skills in College Learners*

| Participant Suggestions for Soft-Skills Development | Students (S) n=3 | | | Staff (Stf) n=2 | | Faculty (F) n=2 | | Administrators (A) n=2 | | N=9 (% of participants) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Embed soft-skills pedagogy into existing program curriculum or general elective(s) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | 8 |
| | 100% | | | 100% | | 100% | | 50% | | 88.9% |
| Implement pre-arrival activities for learners | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 3 |
| | 33.3% | | | 100% | | 0% | | 0% | | 33.3% |
| Create an institution-wide awareness campaign and exposure | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | 5 |
| | 66.7% | | | 0% | | 100% | | 50% | | 55.6% |
| Offer soft-skills development as a student service (i.e. like counselling) | ✓ | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 33.3% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 0% | | 11.1% |
| Offer soft-skills workshops | | | | | | | | | ✓ | 1 |
| | 0% | | | 0% | | 0% | | 50% | | 11.11% |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Implement mentorship programs for learner development | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 4 |
| | 0% | | 0% | | 100% | | 100% | | 44.4% | |

**Embed Soft-Skills Pedagogy.** The majority of participants (88.9%), this included all participants except for one administrator, recommended that soft-skills pedagogy be embedded into existing program curriculum or through the institution's elective classes. General education elective classes are a requirement for most college certificate programs and for all Ontario college diploma programs (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2003/2009). Moreover, applied degree programs offered at Ontario colleges are mandated to incorporate breadth electives into their program mapping (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, 2018). Although the completion of general or breadth elective classes is mandatory, learners are able to choose from a list of elective courses that range in subject matter (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, 2018). Elective classes (general or breadth) are meant to provide students with learning opportunities, that are outside of their core program area to expand thinking, skills, and to foster the development of global citizens (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2003/2009).

**Pre-Arrival Activities.** Three participants (33.3%) mentioned that soft-skills development should begin prior to learners starting their college journey. Wanda (Stf2) noted that soft skills should be "not just embedded in curriculum," but rather, it should be a collaborative effort that expands beyond the classroom to involve all members of the institution. Wanda (Stf2) shared with me her belief in the importance of breaking away from the daily traditions of 'the institution' to consider how "we tailor such an old institutional [model]." She (Stf2) went on to

187

finish this sentiment by questioning a staple of 'the institution,' *the classroom lecture*, its duration of existence, and the small amount of movement in changing this [the lecture] form of pedagogical delivery. She (Stf2) stated, "like the model of the college lectures has been around for how many years?" I saw this as Wanda (Stf2) alluding to the notion that changes in institutional processes and how pedagogy is viewed and delivered is necessary for reinventing the role of colleges in addressing soft skills as an institution-wide responsibility. Wanda (Stf2) suggested that pre-arrival activities designed to prepare learners for their college journey are needed to foster a welcoming environment. She (Stf2) spoke about starting to build those skills, "the second they are accepted and they've paid that deposit to hold their spot." She (Stf2) made reference to creating "online non-credit" webinars, and also suggested surveying students prior to entering college to determine their levels of soft skills so that supports could be tailored based on learner results. She explained, "it's almost as though you take a scale." Using a scaled approach would help to determine the learner's "areas of improvement and how do we cater to that student versus the student who you know has a one on all the scales or a five on all the scales or a variety of things" (Wanda, Stf2).

Wanda (Stf2) stressed the importance of helping students early on in their college journey to understand how and where to find supports. She (Stf2) noted that this was the "first part of developing those soft skills," and that it was necessary for students to successfully transition to college life and in making them more prepared for their learning environment. She suggested that,

> We need to start building a welcoming, a more welcoming environment so that some of
> these skills, so like their self-confidence and their self-advocacy, you know, we can kind
> of get them in the door and then we can start building them. We need to get them in the

door first and I think that's the biggest challenge, those are the students that we miss out

on. (Wanda, Stf2)

Wanda (Stf2) also spoke about skills as a developmental process that occurs over time.

There was this idea that a baseline level of self-confidence and self-advocacy was needed for

learners to feel comfortable to seek supports. Once that baseline level was achieved, then skills

could continue to be scaffolded throughout the learner's college journey.

Carol (Stf1) also spoke of skill building as a developmental process that is not a one-time

event. She (Stf1) discussed the possibility of beginning the skill development process during

some of the earliest interactions a student would have with their new college, at new student

orientation. Carol (Stf1) saw the integration of skill building in new student orientation events as

the best time and way to begin the soft skills development process. She (Stf1) suggested to

"build into Orientation, even through the virtual communities" by integrating online resources

and educating learners on "why certain things are required and important." In particular, Carol

(Stf1) saw necessity in teaching learners 'why' soft skills are valuable for work, life, and student

successes. Similar to Wanda (Stf2), Carol (Stf1) discussed pre-arrival activities as being

significant to a learner's early developmental process. From a student perspective, Sharon (S3)

fortified the idea of knowledge building by suggesting that colleges "reiterate that these [soft

skills] are very important and that there's [pause] you're putting a name to things." It was

perceived to be helpful with self-awareness and associating skill names with behaviour.

However, Carol (Stf1) was clear to me that it was not a one and done type of

developmental process. From her (Stf1) perspective, soft-skills education should be embedded in

various programming and reinforced through interactions with members of the college. There

was an assertion from Carol (Stf1) that her role as a student services practitioner plays an integral

role in learner development and that recognition that learning takes place beyond the classroom setting is necessary to mobilize all facets of the college to create a supportive network of learning opportunities. Carol (Stf1) spoke very specifically of teaching methods she uses when advising and coaching learners. She (Stf1) explained, "If somebody comes in to me and it's obvious that that [time management] is an issue for them, I will teach them that." Carol (Stf1) spoke of how she assesses and tailors her teaching method with each student that she advises and explained, "So for some students I'm doing this as a very structured teaching process. For other students I'm doing as a, here's some information for you, good luck with that." Carol (Stf1) brought attention to the integral role all members of the institution have in student soft-skills development.

*Skills as a Student Service.* One participant (11.11%) made the suggestion to offer soft-skills development as a student service. Kamala (S1) asserted that soft-skills development "can't be something mandatory," such as in the form of a mandatory class. She (S1), once again, expressed her belief in individual differences among learners when it comes to soft-skill levels, noting that there are still several learners who are proficient in many of the soft skills. Nonetheless, she acknowledged that "there is something to definitely be said for like reforming that system and being able to marry life skills and academic skills" and offered an understanding that skills such as motivation, personal responsibility, and confidence are factors that would assist students to seek and attend soft-skills development programming on their own volition. She explained,

> You know; if you don't have motivation and personal responsibility and confidence, how can you get out of your house to these courses? And so, I mean you have to help yourself. You have to make the decision to help yourself. This is something that I've talked about with a lot of my friends about like just counselling and taking care of your own mental

health for instance because that's a big thing that we've been talking about as a program

and just like with my friends. It's something that you have to make the decision to start.

And I think that the development of soft skills seems similar to me because some people

innately have more of them and don't feel like they need to develop them further because

they already have strategies of developing them through academia. (Kamala, S1)

Kamala (S1) pointed to learners needing to have the ability to self-reflect and recognize

their own areas of improvement as a first step toward productive soft-skills development at the

institution. Accessing supports at the institution to enhance the specific soft skills would be the

next step. Kamala's (S1) ability to draw parallels between students seeking soft-skills assistance

to that of a learner who seeks strategies to enhance, develop, or foster their own mental health,

brought a sense of urgency to our conversation. She (S1) viewed soft-skills development as an

essential student service and fortified comments made by other participants who discussed the

need for learners to recognize the importance of soft skills for personal and academic successes.

***Institution-Wide Awareness Campaign.*** More than half of the participants (55.6%)

shared their view that exposure to soft skills, and, or, an institution-wide awareness campaign

would be needed to aid in the improvement and development of soft skills in today's college

learners. The purpose of awareness building would be to educate the college community to the

importance these skills hold in academic and life successes. Kamala (S1) elaborated on her

experience of "taking a gap year," by explaining to me that her soft skills were developed

through exposure and "through necessity." She (S1) expressed, "having to figure out my own

wants and needs and goals. Kind of forces you to develop these. And I think knowing the

importance of these might make people want to develop them more in an academic situation."

Kamala (S1) attributed her *gap year,* which included work and international travel, to exposing

her to situations that necessitated the development of skills to deal with the new and varied day-to-day interactions. Sharon (S3) also expressed exposure as a means of development and a tool for reflective practice. She (S3) explained, "And I know for me exposure was like a big thing. Like just learning about something for the first time and then going, oh maybe I should implement this. So it doesn't necessarily have to be like a course." Sharon (S3) felt that although she has heard of particular soft skills in the past, having "hard definitions" has made it easier for her to make a connection to the expectations of each skill. As a result of reviewing the soft-skills list and definitions as part of this research study, Sharon (S3) noted:

> If someone were to come up to me now I know like oh you need to work on this, or this is
> what it is. Or if you want to look this up and try to, you know, teach yourself or find ways
> to implement this into your life to like help you with schoolwork or home life or
> whatever, then I can do that.

The classifications of skills were seen to be necessary for the exposure and education process. I believe Sharon (S3) saw that linking behaviours or traits with the terminology *soft skills*, while also providing concrete definitions and examples of how the skills impact successes, would create self-awareness in learners to the possible areas of needed development. Sharon (S3) provided the example of 'public speaking.' She explained,

> Like the Toastmasters thing, I think people, when they hear like, oh it's a public speaking
> group, they automatically, even if you're not going to it, you know, oh people who are
> afraid of public speaking or people who are introverted or people who need to learn that
> skill of being comfortable in front of an audience, they will go to that. (Sharon, S3)

Sharon (S3) expressed how public speaking is a skill widely known by the population to be an important skill for academic, personal, and professional successes. The awareness level is

high enough that many learners would recognize Toastmasters as a program designed to help individuals develop this skill. However, Sharon (S3) was adamant that individuals need "that self-awareness that you know that you're terrified" to be able to recognize a need to seek support for development.

Both faculty members interviewed spoke of the need for faculty buy-in. More specifically, there was a call from these participants for an increased awareness among faculty members to the importance these skills play in learner successes. Nina (F1) expressed, "I think it's really important for faculty to also have an understanding of the importance of the soft skills and a commitment to integrate that and embed it in both the teaching and development and also the evaluation." Nina (F1) communicated to me that awareness among faculty could translate into a conscious understanding of the value and role of integrating these skills into their pedagogical practice. Tessa (F2) echoed this importance by speaking to the necessity of reminding faculty of the significance of soft skills. She went on to say, "Whether it be something you send out at the beginning of the semester because we have more direct contact with students than probably any services does." Tessa (F2) also spoke to the "power" and "influence" that the faculty role has on learners by recognizing that a faculty member's "presence coming into a classroom commands something from students." She (F2) went on to discuss that this command of the classroom encourages learners to listen, at least for the "first couple weeks." In essence, this creates a window of opportunity for soft-skills development and discussion.

Tessa (F2) discussed awareness as a joint venture between members of the college and explained the need for the college to start "looking at us as a partner so that we can help too." Creating an awareness campaign that involves faculty members who would use their platform,

influence, and frequent exposure to students, especially at the beginning of the term, to help

educate and foster awareness to skill importance. She continued by saying,

> We know what's needed, so even if I, man I got these students, I know they're back there
>
> talking, they need to practice time management. Oh there was an email that came out that
>
> they're offering these kind of seminars or something like that. (Tessa, F2)

Her (F2) statement suggested to me that working with other college areas as a collective

approach would require awareness, partnership, and communication that is effective to ensure

learners are referred appropriately and in a timely manner. Nonetheless, that faculty involvement

would maximize the school's chances of identifying students in need and getting them to the

appropriate supports. Moreover, Adam (A1) spoke about soft-skills awareness as the college

creating a variety of opportunities that included "team building exercises," extra-curricular

activities, clubs, athletic activities, co-op opportunities, and workshops.

    ***Soft-Skills Workshops.*** Although participants mentioned workshops in their interviews as

a method for developing soft skills, only one participant (11.11%) overtly suggested it as a

solution for college learner skill development. Laura (A2) saw workshops as an alternative to

classes. She (A2) explained that workshops present an opportunity to meet other people and for

learners to "get their buddies to go." Nonetheless, Laura (A2) raised two features that soft-skills

workshops would need in order to be successful. First, workshops need to incorporate "real life

examples" that learners can relate to and apply. Laura (A2) argued that if "you don't get a chance

to use those skills right away, you forget." As a result, she suggested that workshops be

introduced as a series to ensure the follow-up of key points and for learner questions to be

addressed. She (A2) noted that the development of soft skills must be practical and dismissed my

question of whether workshops could be online. She (A2) revealed, "It's got to be practical."

Expressing that there must be a human connection to learn such skills. Second, Laura believed that workshops should be incentivized to encourage students to attend. For example, Laura suggested that attendance at soft-skills workshops be credited to a co-curricular record that learners can show to potential employers upon graduation. Nonetheless, Tessa (F2) raised a problem with workshops, suggesting that individuals need to be able to recognize their own need for particular skill development and then be willing to access the support. She (F2) explained, "Because as much as we might make it [workshops] accessible to people, just going back to power dynamics and so forth, people are either not engaged for varied reasons." This sentiment circled back to the underlying premise of this research on the influence of soft skills on a learner's ability to engage with resources intended for their success. Tessa (F2) spoke of a learner's ability to benefit from a resource (a workshop in this case) as being dependent on a learner's ability to engage with it.

*Mentorship Programs.* Incorporating mentorship as a means of raising soft-skills levels in college learners was suggested by 44.4% of participants. Laura (A2) suggested that the college create a mentorship program for employees of the college to mentor learners on basic life skills. She (A2) mentioned items like, how to prepare to talk to someone, how to advocate for yourself without causing friction, and how to make eye contact. According to Adam (A1), "I think the mentorship or in being involved in those situations is the only way to truly learn it;" referring to the type of social skills foundational to soft skills. While, faculty participants spoke of classroom mentorship and the modeling of soft skills as necessary for learner development. As suggested by Tessa (F2), "I have to be the example and the model of what that is," referring to the modeling of soft skills in her classroom to heighten awareness of classroom expectations and for soft-skills development among her learners.

**Fourth Round of Questions: Wrap-Up**

The fourth round included one final question to ensure that participants had an opportunity to share any other thoughts about the topic that I may not have captured in my line of questioning, or that the participant felt was relevant and wished to share. The question asked of participants included:

1. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you wish to share?

The results of this question are presented below.

***Participants' Final Thoughts***

As we discussed final thoughts, participants Rachel (S2), Wanda (Stf2), and Laura (A2) closed with nothing further to add or with discourse unrelated to the study. Nonetheless, Sharon (S3), Nina (F1), Tessa (F2), Kamala (S1), Adam (A1), and Carol (Stf1) reinforced a need for soft-skills exposure and education for members of the college community (students, staff, faculty, and parents). Sharon (S3) appreciated that I had put "a name to things" by exposing her to the soft-skills list that outlined various skills. Sharon (S3) felt she knew the skills; however, "couldn't like name them." As our interview concluded, she (S3) appeared more confident in her understanding of the impact these skills could have on her personal and academic life.

Nina (F1) and Tessa (F2) reflected on their roles as faculty members commenting on the importance of "revisiting these concepts." There was an understanding that although the focus of the research study was on the impact of soft skills on a learner's post-secondary journey, a realization of how critical it is "for faculty to also have an understanding of the importance of the soft skills" (Nina, F1) was noted. Specifically, Tessa (F2) spoke of how seeing the list for her evoked a sense of importance in the promotion and development of such skills within the classroom. She revealed,

I want to say thank you in the sense that, for me I never really [pause] like I think sometimes I may have overlooked the importance of these skills. And I think seeing them actually on paper allowed me to really process the importance and reflecting on how it impacts the success of students. And so even though I may have, I'm aware of these individually, when you put them on paper collectively I can see how much it's needed. (Tessa, F2)

Tessa (F2) stressed that faculty members need to be visually reminded of these skills as they enter a new academic year. She (F2) articulated, "So I think sometimes it's revisiting these concepts that collectively we can have and we pay attention to it." She (F2) added, "sometimes that has an impact to say okay, to heighten our awareness of it." Her assertion notes that a campaign to visually remind faculty members of the various soft skills and their importance could act to reinforce their value and heighten overall awareness, which, in turn, could translate to soft-skills development.

Kamala (S1) acknowledged, "parent awareness is important too," speaking in a manner that suggested we cannot forget about the significance of the parental role in building and endorsing these skills. Kamala (S1) noted, "research like this was absolutely non-existent back then," referring to when her parents might have attended school, and recognizing that some parents may not be fully aware of how impactful soft skills could be on student development, experiences, and future successes.

Adam (A1) closed our discussion by stressing the importance of communication, while Carol (Stf1) stressed the importance of personal responsibility, especially in work environments where a person's actions impacts others. Carol (Stf1) was also adamant to point out the notion of 'good anxiety.' She (Stf1) wanted to make it clear to me that over the last two decades she has

seen a shift in how anxiety is seen in our society. She (Stf1) noted, "You should never be anxious, you should never feel fear, you should never be upset, is just not real." I could see that it was important for her to express this view before closing our interview. She noted that,

> If you're going to be hit by a bus, anxiety is good; you need to get your ass out the way.
>
> Anxiety is good if you have an exam coming up, you should be anxious about it and you should be studying and 'oh by the way, everybody feels that way and they have done [so] for millennia.' (Carol, Stf1)

Carol's (Stf1) use of an extreme, "If you're going to be hit by a bus," illustrated her need to highlight the critical role she feels anxiety can play in safety and in academic success. Carol (Stf1) saw *anxiety* as a word that has shifted over the years to solely include a negative connotation. I believe Carol (Stf1) saw a dire need for this view to be changed among students and society as a whole, since, according to her, it has led to "a lot less coping skill."

In the following and final chapter, I will summarize my research study by discussing the findings as they relate to the research questions and the literature reviewed in chapter two. Recommendations to address soft skills as they relate to the post-secondary journey of college learners (experiences, development, engagement, and ultimately their decision or ability to persist to graduation) will also be presented.

## Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

**Summary**

In this qualitative research study, I sought to understand the level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in today's post-secondary learner, as well as the influence these skills might have on a learner's post-secondary journey (experiences, development, engagement, and ultimately their decision or ability to persist to graduation). In North America, student attrition rates have consistently held at 30-40% for decades (Fisher & Engemann, 2009), with a majority of those students leaving in their first year (Astin, 1975; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Moxley et al., 2013; O'Keeffe, 2013; Tinto, 1987, 1993, 2006-2007). Research has shown that Ontario colleges, specifically those in the Greater Toronto Area, experience slightly higher attrition rates that range from 29-45% (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013). Although not all student attrition should be considered negative, student attrition often carries with it complex social and financial implications that reverberate through post-secondary institutions, local, national, and even global economies, as well as at personal levels. The most obvious consequences include the loss of revenue for institutions, the lost opportunity for knowledge building uniquely gained from post-secondary education, and, in turn, the loss of potential employment opportunities resultant from earned credentials (Drea, 2004; Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Freeman et al., 2007; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Lee, 2017; O'Keeffe, 2013; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2012; Stelnicki et al., 2015; Tinto, 1993). Student attrition numbers have held relatively steady despite increased attention by many post-secondary institutions to continually develop and implement retention programming (Berger et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012). Retention theories, new and old, which largely underscore institutional retention programming, often account for the social and academic relationships students form with their post-secondary

institution as being predictors of their retention (Astin, 1999; Kift et al., 2010; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987). However, questions have been raised as to learner preparedness when entering higher education and whether today's learners possess the non-cognitive skill levels needed to handle their new learning environment and to adequately engage with the resources designed to support their transition, success, and retention (Adams, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Moreover, when considering today's college learners, scholars have suggested that acknowledgement and consideration of the complexity and uniqueness of the student profile be considered (Lawrence, 2005). For example, most Ontario college students are not the 'traditional' high school to higher education learners. They enter college at various points in their life cycle, have become increasingly diverse over time, and often contend with multiple commitments outside of school, resulting in less time to engage on campus (Jacoby, 2015; Lee, 2017; Tinto, 2012). The rise in diversity has included, but is not limited to, a rise in international learners, increases in first-generation students, as well as students studying part-time (AUCC, 2011; Colleges Ontario, 2014; Lee, 2017). Although diversity in the college sector is one of the key elements that have enriched its' growth, diversity also brings attention to the convergence of varying student needs, levels, values, ideas and relationships held for non-cognitive skills. Research has shown that non-cognitive skills are highly relational and are often formed in the early developmental years of life through experiences and exposure (Blau & Currie, 2006; Carblis, 2008; Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Goleman, 2005; Kail & Wicks-Nelson, 1993). This may portray these skills as fixed at the time a learner enters higher education; however, scholars suggest that personal attributes are capable of development beyond childhood (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Roberts et al., 2006; Specht et al., 2011), and have pointed to the continual support of these skills throughout adulthood as a means of strengthening the skills previously

learned (Cunha & Heckman, 2007). Much of the research related to soft skills or non-cognitive skills has addressed workforce success, with few addressing the post-secondary environment and, more specifically, which areas of a learner's college journey it might impact. As a result, further research was needed to explore the effect that non-cognitive skills might have on students' transitional experiences at the college, their development, their social and academic engagement with the college community, and ultimately their decision or ability to persist to graduation. Therefore, the voices and experiences of nine participants that included three students, two staff, two faculty, and two administrators representing members of the college system were captured to answer the following two research questions:

1. *What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners?*

2. *How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and decisions to persist to graduation)?*

This study was conducted to determine whether non-cognitive skills impact the way students journey through post-secondary life and whether these skills (or lack thereof) play a role in the stagnancy of student attrition numbers. The ultimate goal of this study was to contribute knowledge toward reducing barriers for learners (this includes experiential barriers), the prevention of premature withdrawal, and informing institutional best practices while seeking to understand perspective differences and similarities among various college stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research approach was used. IPA is a qualitative research method guided by exploring participant experiences through a double hermeneutic process (Smith et al., 2009). In the first hermeneutic

stage, the researcher seeks to understand participant experiences from the participant's viewpoint, while in the second stage, the researcher uses their interpretive lens to then make meaning of participant stories (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Reid et al., 2005). A tertiary feature of IPA is the idiographic approach: a process in which the researcher emphasizes detail, depth, and the unique perspectives of individual participants (Smith et al., 2009). More specifically, IPA was utilized in this study to unpack *how* and *what* stakeholders have experienced with non-cognitive skills in post-secondary environments to understand its impact on the post-secondary journey of college learners. The following discussion addresses the two core research questions noted above. It is divided into two corresponding main sections that include: 1) Current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners, and 2) Non-cognitive skills impact on the post-secondary journey.

**Discussion of Findings**

In this first section of the discussion, I address research question one: What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners? The three facets of this question, namely the *level*, *value*, and *role* of non-cognitive skills, were answered and are discussed below.

*Research Question One: Current Level, Value, and Role of Non-Cognitive Skills in College Learners*

Study results revealed that participants viewed non-cognitive skills as integral elements for achieving student success regardless of how differently student success was defined. Achieving student success was interpreted as individualized and primarily based on each learner's personal needs and goals. Moreover, the achievement of such success was also considered by participants to be the joint responsibility of the student and their institution, which

was consistent with literature that suggested student success and retention be treated as a reciprocal effort between the student and their school (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012). There were various skills revealed in this study as contributing to learner success that, in turn, provided insight into the perceived level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in today's college learner. Participant attitudes toward non-cognitive skills also highlighted the perceived areas of skill deficits (level), the reasons why skills are lacking (why specific skills are less valued), and what makes non-cognitive skills important for learners to possess (role).

**Level.** I acknowledge that the determination of non-cognitive skill levels would be a challenge to surmise to a specific number on a scale. Gathering this number would require testing on a mass scale and is likely to change with the slightest shift in student population and as learners progress, interact, and experience higher education. As noted in previous literature, non-cognitive skill development is highly experientially derived and can develop over time (Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Roberts et al., 2006; Specht et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the intent of this research study was not to determine non-cognitive skill levels based on numeric values. Instead, this exploratory study intended to understand the perceptions that internal college stakeholders have of these skills based on their lived experiences.

*Awareness of Non-Cognitive Levels is Disproportionate Among Stakeholders.* The findings of this research revealed a somewhat disproportionate view between college students and employees of the institution as to the perceived level of non-cognitive skills held by today's learners. Although the perceptions of nine participants are not generalizable, it was notable that almost all participants of this study were unwavering in their acknowledgement of skill deficits among the current generation of college learners, with the exception of the student stakeholder group where mixed views were provided. For example, although citing organization, nutrition,

and self-awareness as areas to be developed in the learner population, one student also commented, "Students are generally pretty good" (S1). Another student participant (S2) mentioned that she did not "see anything" or had not taken note of the skill levels among her peer group. These comments allude to a degree of unawareness with student participants regarding non-cognitive skills among their peer group and how other stakeholder groups perceived them. When considering the definition of awareness as "knowledge or understanding of a subject, issues, or situation" (MacMillan, n.d., para. 1), it becomes clear why garnering awareness of non-cognitive skill levels allows a person to be more in tune to the role and value these skills have on academic, social, personal, and future (workplace) success. In turn, a lack of awareness impacts when, or if, a learner seeks support to address skill deficits and when, or if, a learner will encourage members of their social circle to do so. The prospect of a proportionally higher rate of soft-skill unawareness among the student population is considered new and meaningful, as it does not directly compare with existing studies. The prevailing literature that has looked at student perceptions of non-cognitive skills in post-secondary learners has primarily related to skill levels or skills needed upon graduation or of graduates who enter the workforce (Biss & Pichette, 2018; Colleges Ontario, n.d.; Taylor, 2016), and not of the current levels for determining post-secondary success and impact. Student self-perceptions of skills were explored by Lizzio and Wilson (2004); however, since their study measured the perceived relevance of capability on academic studies and future employment, not on whether students lack these skills, a comparison to skill levels could not be made.

**_Perceived Areas of Skill Deficits._** Participants expressed a variety of skills perceived to be lacking among today's student population. In total, 20 skills or traits were revealed, with *problem solving/critical thinking* topping the list as the most frequently cited. Other skills and

traits found to be lacking included, *attention to detail*, *coping skills*, *flexibility*, *independence*, *life skills*, *motivation*, *oral communication*, *organizational skills*, *patience*, *perseverance*, *mathematical skills*, *self-advocacy*, *self-awareness*, *self-confidence*, *self-regulation*, *technical skills*, *time management*, *work ethic/personal responsibility*, and *written communication*; the majority of which are considered non-cognitive skills, with the exception of mathematical and technical skills. Direct comparisons could not be made to existing literature; however, comparing these results with studies that looked at skills needed upon graduation uncovered that students perceived skills related to problem solving/critical thinking and organizational skills as lacking in learners in higher education and upon graduation (Biss & Pichette, 2018; Taylor, 2016). In the same context, oral and written communication emerged as perceived skills faculty members viewed as lacking among current students and upon graduation (See Appendix O for the chart of comparisons). When considering Appendix O, it is important to keep in mind that the skills noted in existing studies as lacking among students upon graduation speaks to specific industries (Business and IT). As such, other sectors would conceivably value skills differently based on the nature of work.

In this study, perceived deficits in non-cognitive skills were found to be skills valued by participants for meeting transitional, academic, and social aspects of college life. Additionally, they were viewed as being necessary for fulfilling personal aspects of life that typically manifest themselves as a result of entry to a critical juncture of one's life cycle, such as higher education. For example, Laura's (A2) assertion that "kids are not eating properly" acknowledged student deficiencies in life skills and how important understanding nutrition is for those transitioning to college life and newly responsible for preparing their meals. Tessa (F2) raised the point about students' lack of baseline knowledge of skills needed to communicate with professors via email

or to access and navigate the college's learning management system. A system important for academic success as it houses content for each course and is the gateway for coursework submissions.

Moreover, Laura (A2) spoke of learner skill deficiencies when explaining how her experiences as a mother of a student at the college and as an administrator have fuelled her belief that learners tend to internalize challenges instead of problem solving to find solutions or self-advocating when necessary to maximize their chances of success. The unawareness associated with lacking non-cognitive skills is best highlighted by Laura's (A2) example of a learner who faced issues when trying to select classes for their timetable due to a college system error, yet decided to go "back to bed" and to "*take whatever is left.*" A decision to "*take whatever is left,*" if critically examined, has potential social, academic, personal, and financial implications. Socially and academically, it leaves the student left to register in classes that might exclude the social circle they rely on for support and social upliftment or exclude the peers they work best with. Rachel (S2) spoke of how her deliberate action to stay with the same group of peers provided her solace in knowing she could rely on them to do their part of the work. Personally, it could delay a learner's graduation, especially if unable to register for pre-requisite or mandatory courses not offered every semester. Financially, if courses become full, the learner might not be able to enroll in the appropriate course load, which could jeopardize funding and financial stability. Learners with scholarships, provincial loans, and other types of funding often need to maintain a minimum course load for eligibility. It is true that there is also an upside to this. A student could benefit from taking *whatever is left* should they end up in a class with all new peers where there is an opportunity to expand their peer group. However, as echoed throughout this

study, non-cognitive skills are often needed to foster those connections, which would make it more difficult for learners who do not possess the skills needed to bolster such interactions.

    ***Differences in Skill Levels Have Associative Links to Student Groups.*** Differences in skill levels were found to have links to particular student groups associated with the program a student chooses, their residency status, the cultural norms they are used to, and age and maturity. Participants (S1, Stf1, Stf2) believed learners who experience challenges or hardships and have proficiency in certain skills are more prone to enter specific programs. It was found that past trauma experienced by a student or someone close to them acts as a motivator for entry to areas of study felt to contribute to future employment in industries where perceived change is possible in preventing similar trauma from happening to others. This draws parallels with the notion of perceived value igniting motivation (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). However, without a functioning or moderate level of skills needed for program success, it was found that students who enter into programs solely on an ideal to do 'good' are met with challenges if not equipped with the skills to handle interactional conflict or to thrive in coursework. The same goes for learners who seek programs because of a self-belief that their skills match those needed for success in a particular program. A disconnect between the perception of the program and actual content was found to impact a learner's ability to thrive.

    A link was also made between skill levels and students from different parts of the world where particular skills for success are valued differently than North American culture. As an example, Rachel's (S2) observation that international students from particular countries will "grab on to other people" when seeking college services accounts for differences in North American societies where individualistic traits, such as personal responsibility and personal initiative, are highly valued in comparison to cultures that are more collective (Laroche &

Rutherford, 2007). As a result, it is believed that international learners from more group-oriented countries will place higher value on skills that are more team-oriented.

Moreover, some participants mentioned age as playing a factor in the differences in non-cognitive skill levels; however, it was also found that maturity and life circumstances largely influence non-cognitive skill levels rather than age. This supports research that recognizes environmental factors as influences in non-cognitive skill formation (Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Kautz et al., 2014). Multiple stories showed that learners who experienced varied facets of life, independence or adversity early and had learned to contend with these factors, were better positioned in skill levels regardless of age.

**Value.** It was evident from the findings that students, staff, faculty members, and administrators of this study placed great value on non-cognitive skills and their role in college learners' journey and success. All participants voiced at least one soft skill they valued as being pivotal for achieving student success. However, it was revealed in this study that participants did not place the same level of value on skills. This was evident by the 21 different skills suggested and the varied ways in which participants articulated the role skills can and should play in post-secondary life. Although participants of this study were not initially asked to specify soft skills in their response to the question of skills thought to be needed for success, all skills mentioned reflected non-cognitive skills or traits. *Independence* and *written communication* topped the list of skills most frequently cited by participants as success contributors. The 19 other skills and traits that followed spoke to the personal nature of student success along with the variety and depth of skills that can contribute to it. The other skills included *oral communication*, *resilience, teamwork, work ethic/personal responsibility, open-mindedness/willingness to learn or access resources, problem solving/critical thinking, creativity/innovation skills, adaptability, ability to*

*find balance, conflict management, coping skills, flexibility, ability to take initiative, leadership, maturity, motivation, organizational skills, self-awareness/self-reflection,* and *time management.* Comparing these 21 skills noted as contributors to success and the 20 skills noted earlier as lacking among the learner population emerged ten skills found to be on both lists. Participants dually noted *coping skills*, *flexibility*, *independence*, *oral communication*, *organization*, *problem solving/critical thinking*, *self-awareness*, *time management*, *work ethic/personal responsibility*, and *written communication* as lacking among students and needed for successful outcomes. The skills motivation, independence, and flexibility are consistent with existing literature that deemed them as skills needed for academic and social assimilation into the post-secondary environment for success and retention to occur (Spady, 1970). It is believed that the additional skills revealed from this study are a direct result of the growing complexity of student life. It is believed that the increasing number of learners who are working while attending school, caring for dependents, contending with visible or non-visible disabilities, or trying to acclimatize to a new country while also attending college (Colleges Ontario, 2014, 2017; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Lee, 2017; Tinto, 2012), account for a growing need for diverse skill sets for post-secondary integration and success to be maximized.

**The Perceived Value of Written Communication is Inconsistent.** *Written communication* was among the most frequently cited skills for achieving success; however, it was also found to be the skill that generated the most polarizing views. For example, Carol (Stf1) placed little value on written communication. She perceived there to be a continuous shift away from the notion of 'proper grammar' by insisting that technological advances that allow for the dictation of words, improvement of sentence structure, and the correction of misspelled words to have changed the course of how people communicate in everyday life and have resulted in less

of a need to learn grammatical rules. Carol's (Stf1) view aligned with those of first-year students in Lizzio and Wilson's (2004) study who perceived *written communication* as less of a contributor to success beyond post-secondary life. Contrary to this view, literature has also shown student groups, including recent graduates, to have views of written communication, or communication in general, as not being developed at the rate necessary for workplace success upon graduation (Biss & Pichette, 2018; Taylor, 2016). Laura (A2) and Tessa's (F2) assertions affirm this by noting written and oral communication to be "the biggest thing" and that students "need to know how to write an essay," for college life, but also for working in industry. The importance of written communication respectfully highlights the divide in the value placed on these skills among stakeholder groups. It reinforces literature that asserts students value skills based on the perceived need for their use in future professional settings (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). The lack of consensus among participants and in literature, along with the variety and depth of skills mentioned, revealed that regardless of the position held in the post-secondary sector (student, staff, faculty member, administrator), the value placed on particular soft skills comes from a place of personal experience. More specifically, by a person's awareness level of particular soft skills, perceived view of how it can maximize success, and what a person classifies as learner success. Nonetheless, it was notable among staff participants that *flexibility* and *resilience* were more frequently cited when discussing skills needed for navigating various elements of post-secondary life. It is believed that the similar positions held by staff participants at the college have likely garnered experiences and interactions with students that are comparable and result in similar perceptions of needed skills.

***There are Reasons for Skill Deficits.*** Findings of this study revealed soft-skills deficits among adult learners are resultant from three significant areas: shifts in *Technology and Social*

*Media*, a *Generational Change in Pedagogical Approaches*, and a *Lack of Preparedness for Post-Secondary Life*. It was shown that the constant use of technology and social media has normalized how text is written and communicated to others. It was found that shifts from in-person interactions and live phone conversations to more interactions online and through text messages have made it challenging to decipher how and when to communicate professionally. Students continue to have "a sense of casualness" (F2) with their email communication to staff and faculty. As noted by Wanda (Stf2), emails are often received without salutations and contain content resembling "a text message to a friend." Tessa's (F2) experience of receiving emails from students that began with words like, "*Hey girl,*" (F2) illustrated the blurred lines of professional communication and drew parallels to comments made by an industry member in Taylor's (2016) study who noted concerns with email communication from recent graduates. The study participant indicated a belief that graduates prefer, and are used to, social media for communicating and that industry should seek to adapt. In this study, communication adaptation was also revealed as a possible solution and shift for colleges to rethink how information is communicated to students. As Wanda (Stf2) shared, students "are used to bite-sized information," and as such, smaller text-style messaging to relay information effectively should be considered, but not at the exclusion of professionalism.

A generational change in pedagogical approach was also revealed to be a reason for skill deficits among today's college learners. Nina (F1) spoke of a shift in how math is taught in elementary school, which she perceived as impacting the development of foundational quantitative and problem solving skills for this generation of students. She noted that less emphasis is being made on math problem repetition and that teacher insecurity of math has negatively influenced students' development of confidence to learn these skills.

A lack of high school preparation for post-secondary expectations was also revealed as affecting learner non-cognitive skill levels and values to some degree. It was noted that institutions "pay attention to being agile and having our students be agile" (Stf2). Learner preparedness was shown to be critical for navigating post-secondary life and a constantly shifting world. Specific details pertaining to learner under-preparedness will be discussed in more depth as I address non-cognitive skills and college learners' post-secondary journey in research question two.

**Role.** In a broad context, the perceived role of non-cognitive skills in college learners was seen as a conduit for achieving an individual's version of success, as well as for positive encounters during one's college journey. With that said, the combined views of student, staff, faculty, and administrator participants of this study characterized student success in four major areas of perception that included, *the achievement of high grades*, *finding, setting, and achieving goals*, *knowledge retention and the ability to apply that knowledge after graduation*, and the *ability to push beyond personal expectations*. Similar to the perceived level and value, these areas of perception are believed to be dependent on the lens each participant entered the study with and are subject to change over time based on individual experiences and the characterization of student success and perceived student goals. Soft skills were not only seen by participants as hard to measure, which is a sentiment fortified by existing literature (Cukier et al., 2015; Taylor, 2016), challenges also present themselves when trying to determine which ones are needed for a learner's success. The role of non-cognitive skills is further addressed as I discuss research question two, which speaks to the impact these skills have on college learners' post-secondary journey.

In this second section of the discussion, I address research question two: How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and decisions to persist to graduation)? All facets of this question were answered and are discussed below.

### Research Question Two: Non-Cognitive Skills Impact on the Post-Secondary Journey

As the sole interviewer in this study, I would be remiss not to mention that participants reacted positively once provided with a list of soft skills and their definitions to consider when reflecting on the journey of college students. It was as though there was a sudden moment of realization, which was confirmed by Tessa's (F2) remark that seeing the skills listed on paper allowed her to "process the importance and reflecting on how it impacts the success of students." Certainly, this showed that the visual representation had connected with participants on some level and appeared to have made it easier for them to relate the skills and their definitions to aspects of college life. Appendix P charts each non-cognitive skill with areas of the student college journey that participants perceived them to impact.

Findings in this study undoubtedly revealed that non-cognitive skills play an impactful role in navigating post-secondary life. Every aspect of a learner's journey that was explored in this research study, namely, experiences, development, engagement, and decisions (or ability) to persist to graduation, rendered results that showed multiple non-cognitive skills as being influential, and in some cases, pivotal to a learner's social, academic, and personal well-being. Each of these areas of post-secondary life was explored, answered, and discussed below.

**Experiences.** Positive post-secondary experiences are believed to create and reinforce a learner's sense of belonging (Cooper, 2009; Lee, 2017), as well as increase their likelihood of success and retention (Astin, 1999; Kift et al., 2010; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014; Spady,

1970; Tinto, 1987). Participants (S1, S3) of this study spoke of these positive college experiences as a delicate balance of social and academic participation in college life. As a result, non-cognitive skills were found to be necessary elements for aiding in the engagement process. Kamala (S1) equated positive college experiences to a learner's ability to engage with their school. She (S1) contended that soft skills are often more influential in the engagement process and more important to college life than cognitive capacity. This aligns with Wechsler's (1943) early account of non-intellective factors as a greater predictor of academic achievement, as well as scholars like Brunello and Schlotter (2011) and Kautz et al. (2014) who asserted the notion of non-cognitive skills being of equal or of higher value than one's cognitive capacity. Although student engagement and academic achievement might not overtly equate, scholars have shown that non-cognitive skills influence social adjustment (such as engagement with one's school), which, in turn, positively impact academic achievement (Bowman et al. (2019). Motivation, persistence, and other skills needed for the engagement process contribute to success. Engaging with multiple facets of the institution expands student opportunities for learning and discovering social and academic connections. Kamala's (S1) expression that, "you get out of college as much as you put in," coincided with theories that associated a learner's level of college involvement (academic and social engagement) with their likelihood of retention and success (Astin, 1999; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987). However, it was also revealed in this study that to effectively engage and integrate into the college sphere, some proficiency in particular non-cognitive skills is needed to prioritize, manage, and balance existing life commitments and successfully handle the onslaught of the 'new.'

***Students Need Skills to Balance the 'New'.*** The notion of the 'new' was conceived in this study as a whirlwind of experiences that learners encounter as they transition into and

journey through post-secondary life. These findings fortify literature that suggests the first six weeks of a learner's post-secondary journey to be a pivotal time in forming a sense of community through integrating and adjusting to their new learning environment (Tinto, 1987). Although the shock and volume of the 'new' can easily overwhelm learners (Freeman et al. 2007; Stelnicki et al., 2015), impact their experiences, and lead to premature withdrawal, results of this study showed the 'new' could be further exacerbated when compounded with mental health challenges and, or, multiple commitments outside of the post-secondary sphere. Sharon's (S3) battle with mental health in high school demonstrated how quickly a learner's academic progress could be jeopardized. Her (S3) first two years of school were good, but then items like "attendance, grades, it all just kind of went down" once her depression began to set in. Participants contended that similar events are even more likely in higher education. As noted by Wanda (Stf2), many adolescents or early adult learners who transition into post-secondary life are, "being tested to the point where a lot of….fully mature-aged adults wouldn't be able to handle the stress." The lack of preparedness and skills consistent with maturity then act as a deterrent to post-secondary integration, involvement, and resilience, which subsequently lead to negative impacts on student retention (Adams, 2012; Astin, 1999; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987).

Tinto (1987) asserted that coping skills are important for aiding learners as they adjust to their new learning environment. Spady (1970) spoke of impulse control and rationality to aid in institutional assimilation. Although some of the skill names in this study differ at times from the existing literature (e.g. impulse control, self-regulation), concepts remain consistent. Moreover, multiple participant stories spoke to the difficult choices learners who enter post-secondary life, while contending with numerous commitments make to organize and prioritize their 'new' and old realities. As such, learners who transition from high school are primarily impacted by the

215

'new,' while mature learners, although likely to have higher levels of skills associated with maturity, are more likely to also contend with multiple responsibilities outside of college life. These findings are consistent with literature from Bean and Metzner (1985) and Lee (2017), who asserted that mature learners, a notable segment of the college population (Colleges Ontario, 2017), are less likely to engage in school social events as they are often the ones attending school while juggling familial, employment, and, or, other responsibilities they value higher than school extracurricular activities (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005).

Sharon's (S3) account of how she prioritizes social events and her academic assignments were based on the value and impact she believed each would have on her social and academic life. This type of internal negotiation demonstrated two items. First, good experiences are personal and based on what a learner values most. Second, what a learner values and perceives as necessary are what drives their decision to engage, or not, with their institution. These findings align with Lee's (2017) assertion that social engagement is often met with a condition for part-time students. Part-time students are less likely to engage socially if there is a perception that engagement will come at the expense of their grade achievement (Lee, 2017). This type of internal negotiation that assesses perceived value was also shown to coincide with Lizzio and Wilson's study. Lizzio and Wilson (2004) found that students place more value on skills they perceive will be needed for their future vocation and are more motivated to develop those skills. These findings support the idea that students are unique and require different types of institutional engagement to integrate into the school community, which may not necessarily be social (Dietsche, 1990; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Lee, 2017). However, these findings also show that awareness in the value of particular aspects of college life, including how non-cognitive skills impact student success and retention, are critical for learners to recognize their

216

usefulness and the need for them to be developed.

### *Time Management is Only one of the Skills Students Need for a 'Good Experience'.*

Although *time management* was the non-cognitive skill most frequently cited by participants as impacting learner college experiences, it was clear that it was the most discernible tool for balancing multiple commitments and could not be confirmed as the most impactful since the explanation of other non-cognitive skills and how they impact experiences revealed a 'good' school experience is personal. Nevertheless, it was revealed that *time management* is critically important for prioritizing multiple commitments and balancing the 'new.' This finding aligns with Bowman et al.'s (2019) assertions. They found *time management* to correlate to a learner's social adjustment positively. Notably, Bowman et al. (2019) also saw *self-efficacy*, *self-discipline*, and *grit* similarly and spoke of the interrelatedness and, at times, co-dependency of these skills in impacting academic achievement, and, in turn, student retention.

Other skills in this study that impact a learner's college experiences included *self-advocacy*, *self-confidence*, and *communication (written and oral)* for seeking clarification or for class participation. Having *coping skills* was viewed as essential for handling high-stress situations, and *flexibility* was said to allow students to "learn materials outside their passion" (Stf2), which, in turn, can spark new interests, new ways of thinking, and open someone up to potentially new and enriching experiences. Participants saw *problem solving/critical thinking*, *conflict management*, *independence*, *motivation*, *perseverance*, *resilience*, *self-awareness/self-reflection*, *self-regulation*, *teamwork*, and *work ethic/personal responsibility* as contributors to academic and social experiences, including the ease and ability with which learners can form, thrive within, and maintain social circles. Social circles were shown to be impactful to learner experiences through peer motivation and in finding a sense of belonging within one's institution.

   ***Skills Often Work Together to Maximize Learner Experiences.*** The findings of this research study revealed non-cognitive skills often interconnect and work together to maximize learner experiences, which aligns with Bowman et al.'s (2019) assertion that non-cognitive traits are interrelated and sometimes reliant on one another. However, for clarity purposes, it is important to note that Bowman et al. (2019) spoke specifically of four non-cognitive skills reviewed as part of their study, namely: *self-efficacy, time management, self-discipline,* and *grit.* The exploration of non-cognitive skills in this study touched upon a greater number of skills and, as a result, it was found that the interconnectedness and reliance of non-cognitive skills on one another was expansive beyond the four skills noted in the Bowman et al. (2019) study. Figure 16 illustrates this by showing more examples provided by participants, which demonstrate a variety of non-cognitive skills that work together for successful outcomes. These skill sets were perceived to enhance academic and social post-secondary experiences in different ways.

**Figure 16**

*Skills to Enhance Academic and Social Experiences*
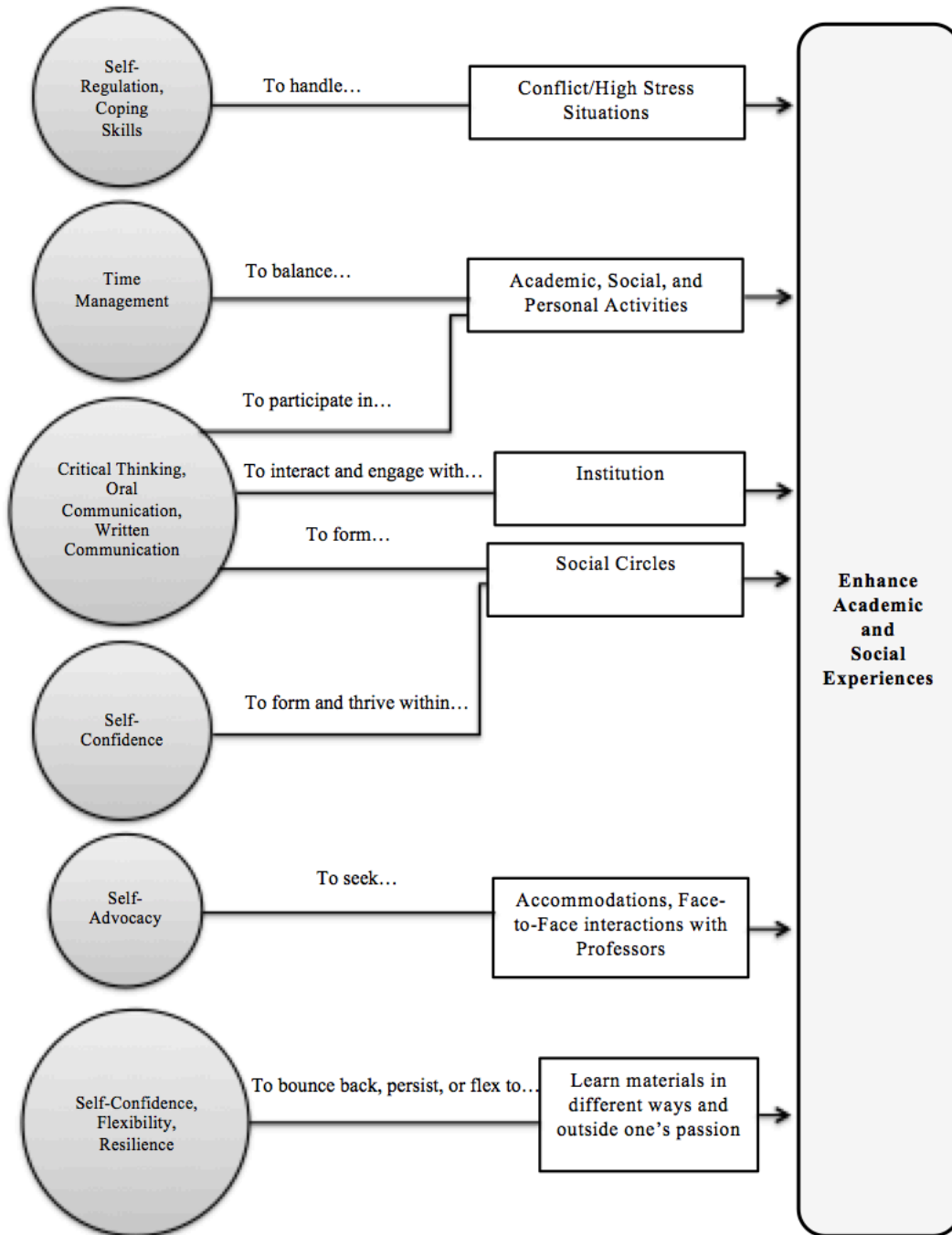


*Note.* This figure illustrates a variety of skills and items that impact a learner's college

experiences.

***Skills Needed are Heavily Tied to Program Type.*** Findings of this study revealed the level and type of non-cognitive skills needed for positive student experiences are heavily tied to program type. Programs in social services and in business were said to have a high rate of group work, and as such, the ability to work effectively in teams was identified as a need. Moreover, participants (F2, Stf2) asserted that bullying in-class and through social media had impacted the way learners interact with one another and their stress levels. Therefore, Wanda's (Stf2) assertion of Social Service Worker and Early Childhood Education programs as having high incidence rates are poignant to this discussion of learner experiences and skills. As noted by Tessa (F2), "we can't ignore the fact that bullying and cyber-bullying and so forth; the use of social media has," since there is a negative impact on learners, their mental health, and their ability to focus on school. As shared by Tessa (F2), the result of bullying, "trickles into all the other aspects," such as a learner's self-confidence and ability to self-regulate. Therefore, skills like *coping* and *conflict management* become even more necessary for successful experiences, especially in programs with high bullying rates.

**Development.** In this study, a learner's development was categorized as *personal* and *academic*. These two categories were found to be intertwined, inseparable from one another, tied to successful outcomes, and heavily dependent on a learner's willingness to integrate with other people. Having a 'willingness' to be flexible and open to interacting with peers of varying backgrounds, who hold different views, are differently-abled, or otherwise diverse from one's self was revealed to contribute to building a greater awareness of oneself and others. Sharon (S3) saw all soft skills as contributors to the type of personal growth that "makes you more aware in general" of other people and how your own actions can impact others. This awareness of self and others through friendship building and respectful interactions and relationships was discussed as

transferable beyond the college setting and into future endeavors, such as in the workplace. Scholars such as Kuh (2005) and Wang (2020) similarly pointed to interactions with peers from different backgrounds as a means of growth. The learner becomes more apt in their thinking and more likely to engage in future 'diverse encounters' outside of the learning environment. Moreover, Lund and Lee (2015) and Dimitrov et al. (2014) found that teaching diversity and intercultural communication strategies work to build cultural humility and dispel misconceptions and assumptions of others. Adam's (A1) personal story of moving from a small town to attend a college where he would "learn and be working with other people who had different opinions," was described by him as "illuminating" and "real education" and demonstrated how *flexibility* and having a willingness to engage with diverse people and perspectives not only contributes "to debate and to trying to understand people and communicate with people" (A1), but also to openness and the development of the whole person; personally, academically, or otherwise.

The skills *flexibility*, *resilience*, *independence*, *self-confidence*, and *self-regulation* were found to be among the most impactful skills thought to influence student development. Whether as an adolescent or a mature learner, entering college is a pivotal time in one's life (Adams, 2012). Notably, it was seen by participants as a time in life, especially for young learners, when "their personal and academic kind of collide and those soft skills and strengthening them and building them is what can get them through it" (Stf2). Participants (A1, A2, F2, S1, S3, Stf1, Stf2) echoed the sentiment that learners, typically those who enter college around the ages of 17-19, do so at a time in their life when they likely encounter a need for a much greater level of independence for the first time. These results are consistent with literature that has attributed post-secondary transition challenges with the need for students to possess greater levels of "independence, initiative, and self-regulation" (Stelnicki et al., 2015, p. 215). Students become

less sheltered and are expected to handle components of academic life and personal responsibilities previously managed by a parent(s) or guardian(s). Not being prepared to handle the new challenges and new level of independence leaves students in a precarious state and coincides with what Adams (2012) asserted as a need to develop non-cognitive skills before post-secondary entry to prepare learners for the many facets of higher education appropriately. As Wanda (Stf2) articulated, students begin to contend with the collision of personal and academic life by having to cope, manage, critically think, address and resolve matters that can include, but are not limited to, the juggling of multiple tests, exams, transportation, the pressures of family and friends, unexpected tragedies, along with housing or even food insecurities. Moreover, a learner's ability to speak up in class, ask for help or clarification, work with others, form social circles, manage emotions, cope with the vast array of potential stressors that can occur at any given time, were examples provided by participants as instances where non-cognitive skills influence academic and personal development.

**Engagement.** A learner's engagement or involvement with their institution has been asserted as being instrumental to gaining a sense of belonging (Cooper, 2009; Gauvreau et al., 2016; Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 1987) and fundamental to the influential retention theories addressed in this study (Astin, 1999; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987). It has been shown in this study that non-cognitive skills play a critical role in students engaging academically and socially within their college. As findings have already revealed, non-cognitive skills are primarily shown to intersect and work in conjunction with one another for successful outcomes. However, *self-confidence* was clearly articulated as the dominant skill impacting learner abilities and desires to engage with their school. Non-cognitive skills associated with learner academic and social engagement (see Appendix P) were shown to bolster a learner's ability or desire to participate and attend

institutional events, to access supports and resources, and to interact with others to create social circles, to ask for help, or to seek clarification from their professor, various service areas, or peers. Nonetheless, reasons for disengagement were also revealed to be beyond a deficiency in non-cognitive skill levels. Reasons were exemplified by the way a school is structured, the school's ability to display a welcoming atmosphere, and the volume and the value learner's place on their responsibilities outside of the school.

***Reasons for Learner Disengagement Extend Beyond Skills***. The vast array of personal circumstances and commitments students contend with were viewed by participants as factors, beyond skills and abilities, which influence a student's desire to engage with their school. Wanda (Stf2) described the study site as a "commuter school" with a high rate of students who travel to campus solely to attend class and not to engage in other on-campus activities. As an outcome, these learners do not fully immerse themselves in many aspects of the school environment, which is especially true when college activities, events, and services are primarily offered in-person; a service approach commuter students are less likely to engage in. As noted in existing literature, not all students wish to engage with their school in the same ways (Dietsche, 1990; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Lee, 2017). As such, the ability to attend class and then leave to fulfill other commitments, such as employment or caring for a family member, can be conceived as the reason some learners would choose to attend the institution in the first place. Thus, as Lee (2017) asserted, institutions need to consider more varied ways of engaging with their diverse population. Therefore, moving beyond the traditional ideas of learner engagement is necessary for inclusion of those students who cannot, or do not, desire engagement in the traditional ways.

Kamala's (S1) comments that she "felt pretty part-time there" as her reasoning for not engaging in her first post-secondary experience revealed that although skills like *self-confidence* influence engagement, they are not the sole factor. Although Kamala (S1) can attend events independently and is a person with a high level of confidence, her feelings of disengagement illustrated that institutions also play a role in fostering school environments that feel welcoming. Furthermore, Sharon's (S3) story of a faculty member who displayed care and approachability illustrated how positive interactions can encouraged confidence, even if just in that moment, to ask questions and seek clarification. Sharon (S3), a self-proclaimed introvert and insecure person, noted that it "opens us up." Although she noted being on the lower end of the self-confidence continuum, her professor's caring and positive demeanour allowed her to worry less about making mistakes, which is believed to begin an incremental process to development. The welcoming nature of a school was also shown to be deeply tied to its physical structure. Wanda (Stf2) spoke of concerns that students with sensory challenges have when entering rooms that are too brightly lit or too noisy. Considering activities, classrooms, student spaces, and service areas that take this into account by dimming the light or reducing noise was found to help promote environments seen as welcoming, inclusive, and conducive to student engagement. These findings correspond to literature that speaks to institutional factors as playing a significant role in how learners perceive themselves, their school, and their role in the school community (Stelnicki et al., 2015). Dissatisfaction, isolation, and disengagement are noted in literature as contributors to student withdrawal (Freeman et al., 2007; Stelnicki et al. 2015).

**Impact on Decisions and Ability to Remain in School and Persist to Graduation**. As articulated in many retention theories, a learner's academic and social engagement is said to predict their ability to be retained and persist to graduation (Astin, 1999; Kift et al., 2010; Lizzio,

2006; O'Keeffe, 2013; Penn-Edwards & Donnison 2014; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987). Non-cognitive skills were revealed in this study as influential in a student's decision-making process, which, in turn, was viewed to largely impact a student's actions or inactions (including engagement with their institution), and consequently, their ability to remain in school.

*Skills Influence Controlled and Uncontrolled Decision-Making*. Decision-making was interpreted and categorized as *controlled* or *uncontrolled* processes based on the skill level a person possesses. More specifically, a person with moderate to high levels of proficiency in skills that included *problem solving/critical thinking*, *conflict management*, *motivation*, *resilience*, *time management*, *work ethic/personal responsibility*, *written communication*, *oral communication*, *self-confidence*, *self-regulation*, *coping skills*, *flexibilit*y, *independenc*e, *self-advocacy*, *self-awareness/self-reflection*, *group work/teamwork*, and *perseverance*, were shown to be better equipped and more likely to make *controlled* decisions. Controlled decision-making was determined to occur when a learner can rationalize and avoid impulsive decisions through reflective practice. This finding aligns with assertions from scholars who have recognized learner maturity that encompass non-cognitive factors such as impulse control and rationality as contributors to social and academic assimilation into post-secondary life (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1970). These learners possess the skill levels needed to seek resources, information, options, clarity, and are better able to adjust, adapt, engage, or cope when and where necessary to make informed decisions. Moreover, it was further determined in this study that controlled decision-making does not directly equate to retention, but rather, to a student's facility to take jurisdiction over their decision to remain in school (or not) through a well-thought out process. For example, *problem solving/critical thinking* was the most frequently mentioned skill among participants as being impactful to a learner's decision-making process and ability to persist to

graduation. As noted by Adam (A1), this, in part, is because it is "going to keep you from making that rash decision," as well as allow for careful and critical consideration of options through reflective practice. The notion of non-cognitive skills significantly impacting student actions shares undertones with Lizzio's success model. Lizzio's (2006) model identified areas or senses that students need when transitioning to post-secondary life to increase their likelihood of success, engagement, and retention. For example, it can be posited that skills to locate, access, and interpret how to use school resources are needed for students to gain what Lizzio saw as a sense of resourcefulness. Additionally, to attain what Lizzio asserted as a sense of capability and commitment to contribute to one's school community will require skills necessary to engage in self-reflection and to take action so that capability can be recognized and for communal participation to occur. Although literature has shown that reflective competence can be a challenging process for learners, especially for less mature or experienced students (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004), self-reflection and self-awareness were deemed to be critical and necessary components in the controlled decision-making process and was noted by two of the three student participants of this study as influential in their own post-secondary pursuits. Notably, both of these students had taken a *gap year* before arriving at the study college and shared with me that their *gap year* is what allowed them time to process, ask questions, re-evaluate goals, and plan their next steps in life and in education.

**_Gap Years That are Purposeful Contribute to Skill-Building_.** The notion of a *gap year* as a critical element for the re-evaluation of life goals, maturity development, and other skill-building, could not explicitly be linked to literature; however, the finding does draw upon similarities with theories that connect student maturity and experience with heightened reasoning, responsibility, independence, flexibility, impulse control/self-regulation (Spady,

1970), as well as with "focus and motivation" (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004, p. 122). It is thus reasonable to conceive that a gap year that fosters constructive interactions with others and new experiences through work, travel, volunteerism, or otherwise, are likely to impact the development of self-reflection, self-awareness, and the reassessment of goals in positive ways. It is also reasonable to consider that taking a gap year can be voluntary or involuntary and be impacted by a person's family status or commitments, socio-economic status, culture, and more. It is commonly known that not all families view time away from school as positive, which present challenges for students who might feel pressured to pick a program and re-enroll in school rather than take the time away from school to learn, grow, and develop in other ways. A learner's desire to take action based on a re-evaluation of goals, in part, aligns with literature that suggests student motivation to learn skills is tied to their awareness of the perceived value for future need (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004).

Contrary to *controlled* decision-making, *uncontrolled* decisions were determined to occur when students lack the non-cognitive skills deemed as positive contributors to decision-making. Uncontrolled decision-making is a process in which the decision-maker is less likely or unable to draw upon the skills needed to make informed decisions. Based on the perceptions of participants, I defined *uncontrolled* decision-making as *decision-making that leads to learner outcomes which lack the sometimes necessary intervention by a student to become informed, take appropriate action, or communicate a need, which, in turn, could negatively impact the learner's ability to control whether or not they remain in school.* The lack of skills was also seen as a contributor to a learner's inability to manage or cope with conflict and challenges in social and academic settings.

***Skills Influence how Students Deal With Challenges***. In this study it was maintained that today's college student population are contending with multiple social, academic, and personal stressors, which is consistent with existing literature (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Kuh, 2005; Lee, 2017; Tinto, 2012), and that lacking the skills to address and cope with challenges encountered in post-secondary life increases the probability of attrition. Participants of this study spoke of social and classroom dynamics, personal or familial commitments, and self-doubt as a few of the challenges facing today's college learner. An inability to utilize skills to cope or manage conflict was said to negatively impact other non-cognitive skill areas (such as self-confidence) and consequentially lead to the self-questioning of one's place in their college. According to Sharon (S3), students question their place in post-secondary life when their academic efforts do not render the results they expect. Moreover, Wanda (Stf2) illustrated that "coming from an education system that doesn't fail them" has negatively impacted non-cognitive skill development. This finding coincides with Adams' (2012) assertion that today's learners cannot appropriately develop life skills as they have not had the opportunity to experience failure and subsequently learn how to build back from it. In turn, it was found that students have "less and less of this ability to handle any type of adversity" (Stf1). They lack the preparedness to deal with disappointment, persevere, and be resilient in the face of hardship. As Wanda (Stf2) explained, students "are not used to getting failed" or to the repercussions of late or missed work because of the 'no zero policy' experienced in high school. In turn, this was interpreted as a need for learners to become aware that there is normalcy in failure to lessen the shock and inaccurate notion that there is no coming back from a failing grade.

**Improving Non-Cognitive Skills in College Learners.** In this study, it has already been revealed that there is a perception among college stakeholders, mainly staff, faculty members,

and administrators, and to a lessor extent students, that today's learners lack proficiency in a variety of non-cognitive skills. As such, it is no surprise that consensus was met when participants were asked whether something should be done to improve and foster soft-skills development among today's learners. Moreover, it is notable that a third of the participants (A1, Stf1, Stf2) expressed that the college has an obligatory role in enhancing these skills in the learner population. The push toward developing non-cognitive skills has been echoed in the literature, which has emphasized the importance of these skills for post-secondary readiness and success (Adams, 2012). Moreover, this study's participants expressed that improvements to non-cognitive skill competency would contribute to the development of learners who are global thinkers, able to adapt to continuous shifts in life, the workforce, and the world. Participant stories and suggestions revealed six major ways that institutions could seek to improve non-cognitive skills among their learners. These six areas included the integration and, or implementation of:

1. soft-skills pedagogy into program curriculum or general elective courses.

2. pre-arrival activities for students aimed at soft-skills development.

3. institution-wide awareness campaigns and exposure.

4. soft-skills development as a student service.

5. workshops that focus on soft-skills development.

6. mentorship programs for learners.

**Embedding Soft-Skills Pedagogy.** The suggestion to embed soft-skills pedagogy into existing program curriculum, either through core program content or via general elective courses was the most highly mentioned with eight (S1, S2, S3, Stf1, Stf2, F1, F2, A2) of the nine participants suggesting this method of improvement. The integration of non-cognitive skills

229

pedagogy into existing curriculum draws parallels to literature that suggests knowledge transfer occurs best over time and when embedded and connected to the existing course content (Hattie et al., 1996; Hazzan & Har-Shai, 2013). As noted by participants (F2, Stf2), faculty have the greatest access to learners, significant influence on learners, and therefore are likely to be effective in developing these skills if they are conscious of modeling their behaviour. In turn, faculty members must have both an acute awareness of the impact these skills have on students as well as the influence their modeling and practical application will have on learner development and success.

  ***Pre-Arrival Activities Aimed at Skills Development.*** Three participants (S3, Stf1, Stf2) of this study suggested activities aimed at non-cognitive skills development to be implemented prior to students starting their post-secondary journey. Wanda (Stf2) felt it best to target learners once they have accepted their offer of admission and have paid the appropriate fees to secure their spot in a program. Beginning the development process early was revealed as a source to provide a welcoming environment, increase learner awareness of support services, and begin the process of ensuring all learners have a baseline level of soft skills needed for a successful transition. The scaffolding of skills would then continue to occur throughout the college journey, aligning with literature that suggests either skills or traits can grow throughout a person's lifecycle (Kautz, 2014; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Roberts et al., 2006; Specht et al., 2011). Participants (S3, Stf1) revealed two primary learning outcomes for non-cognitive skill education. First, learners should gain an understanding of why non-cognitive skills are valuable for work, life, and student success. Second, learners should be able to name each skill and how they are associated with behaviour. Coinciding with Kift et al.'s (2010) assertion of student engagement and retention efforts as an institution-wide effort to aid student transition, participants of this

research study viewed pre-arrival activities in the same light. The responsibility of education and skill development does not solely reside with faculty members but instead reaches beyond the classroom and into all areas of the institution. Through recruitment activities, orientation activities, involving student services practitioners, and more. This method illustrated an all-hands-on-deck approach to skill-building.

*Soft-Skills Development as a Student Service.* Kamala (S1) did not view non-cognitive skill development as learning that should be mandatory. Instead, she saw skill building as an area of development that learners must first recognize on their own accord that support is needed. Kamala (S1) likened it to students seeking help with counselling services for their mental health. The notion of having a service area dedicated solely to building non-cognitive skills was not found in previous literature; however, it should be noted that depending on the institution, various support services offer opportunities for the development of some of these skills. For example, tutoring services provide communication supports, or career services offer presentation skills to build self-confidence.

*Awareness Campaigns and Exposure.* There were five participants (A1, F1, F2, S1, S3) that discussed awareness or exposure to the topic of non-cognitive skills as a suggested means of skill development. It was found that exposure and awareness to "hard definitions" (S3) of non-cognitive skills along with the importance of these skills could "make people want to develop them more in an academic situation" (S1). Notably, participants in this study became more in tuned with the value of soft skills as they became more familiar with the definitions by reading the soft-skills list, through discussion, and by reflecting on their own experiences of employing or observing skill use. As noted previously, the more value students place on skills, the more they are motivated to learn them (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). It is also reasonable to suggest that

the correlation between value and motivation to learn and use skills extends to other stakeholder groups. Participants saw skill exposure and awareness as dually meaningful for students and faculty members. Value for students would facilitate self-awareness and motivate learners to seek how and when to get help. It acts as a reminder of the importance of integrating the value and role of these skills into their pedagogical practice for faculty members. Tessa (F2) viewed the "first couple weeks" of the academic term as the time in which faculty members have the most influence on learners and when students are most attuned to what is being said in class. Moreover, Tessa (F2) saw this period in the academic year when faculty members have "more direct contact with students" than any other area of the institution. With the first weeks of school seen as a pivotal juncture in the student life cycle and a time most susceptible to learner departure (Tinto, 1987), the close nature and perceived influential contact faculty members have with learners during this time were seen as a window of opportunity to foster skill awareness through faculty partnerships. As noted by Tessa (F2), faculty members should be viewed "as a partner" in the plan for student skill-building as they "can help too" and are likely to spend the most time with commuter students who attend class and then leave campus. This draws parallels with Tinto's (2012) assertion of focusing on in-class retention efforts to connect with those students who rarely engage outside of class time. Nevertheless, it was also found that non-cognitive skill awareness should not stop there, but rather, it should be built into a variety of institutional services and extra-curricular activities. Building awareness as a cross-institutional effort aligns with Kift et al. (2010) who viewed student transitional support as an institution-wide effort.

*Workshops.* One participant (A2) suggested the use of workshops as a tool to enhance skill development among learners. However, it was suggested that workshop success would only

be possible if two conditions were met. First, workshops must be practical and incorporate real-life situations so that learners can relate. Second, workshops need to be incentivized to bolster attendance. Moreover, it was noted that workshops be implemented as a series to ensure that learners have breaks in content to apply and reflect on learning, with an opportunity for follow-up in subsequent workshops. The adamancy that workshops be practical was also the reason why Laura (A2) viewed online workshop delivery as ineffective for non-cognitive skill development. However, this finding is contrary to research conducted by Gauvreau et al. (2016), who found that online workshops that were designed with purpose resulted in the development of soft and professional skills, along with camaraderie, social connections, and a collective sense of belonging among those who participated. Workshops that have infused intercultural teachings have been noted in literature as enhancing learner self-awareness (Dimitrov et al. (2014); however, Tessa (F2) raised the concern that workshops require learners to self-identify their need and be willing to access the support. Lacking self-awareness or the skills needed to actively seek and engage with supports designed for one's success reinforces this research's premise, a call for non-cognitive skills awareness, and for the development of skills through multiple means to be considered. Moreover, concerns for skill development through workshops was also raised by scholars who have pointed to a lack of available research to support their impactfulness (Porter & Phelps, 2014).

*Mentorship.* It was revealed that faculty members (F1, F2) and administrators (A1, A2) of this study perceived mentorship as a fundamental way to develop non-cognitive skills. This finding corresponds to literature that speaks to the importance of institutions that work as an educational collective to engage their learners by integrating various sectors within the institution (Kift et al., 2010). Mentoring and modeling through either a targeted mentorship program or

233

through the modeling of behaviour within the classroom through teacher-student interactions or outside of the classroom through administrator-student interactions were perceived as a collective way to heighten skill awareness and development and to contribute to the practical application of skill use. In alignment with the impact of skill modeling, the Levkoe et al. (2014) study illustrated that modeling of skills through service-learning or industry partnerships also contributes to skill-building. However, it was notable that staff participants in this study did not mention this type of mentorship or modeling of skill. Yet, from the personal stories shared by staff participants, it was posited that this is likely because staff members of this study were already of the mind that their current role and interactions with students are heavily tied to skill development through mentoring and coaching. As noted by Carol (Stf1), "If somebody comes in to me and it's obvious that that [time management] is an issue for them, I will teach them that." Her advisor role automatically assesses student need and attempts to compensate for gaps through modeling, mentorship, and coaching. Nonetheless, mentoring and modelling also necessitates the mentor, whether a faculty, administrator, or staff member, to also possess the appropriate level of non-cognitive skills they are attempting to model to ensure appropriate transfer occurs.

The limitations of this research study are outlined below.

**Limitations of Study**

It is acknowledged that seeking the opinions of a small number of students, staff, faculty members, and administrators at one Ontario community college does not explore the impact of non-cognitive skills beyond one college, one province, nor does it include the university setting. Therefore, findings cannot be compared to institutions outside of the Ontario college system, and in turn, may not speak to the potential institutional dichotomies. Furthermore, the perceptions

gathered only reflect a small number of participants' current attitudes and are, therefore, not generalizable. Moreover, the attitudes of college stakeholders are based on their lived experiences and, potentially, the current social climate. Perceptions and attitudes may change over time, which could necessitate replication of this study at a later date to capture the most recent attitudes.

**Conclusions/Implications for Practice**

Questions have been raised regarding learner preparedness when entering higher education and whether today's learners possess the non-cognitive skill levels needed to handle their new learning environment and to adequately engage with the resources designed to support their transition, success, and retention (Adams, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). It has been confirmed in this research study that students face an onslaught of new responsibilities while also contending with their old ones upon entry to post-secondary life. Participant stories revealed that possessing a baseline level of non-cognitive skills better equips learners to juggle new responsibilities, cope with tragedies, form new friendships and social circles, participate in academic and social activities, and to make controlled decisions, which in turn were noted to contribute to student persistence. It should be understood that each learner possesses non-cognitive skills; however, it is the level they possess upon post-secondary entry that can help or hinder their transition into higher education. Moreover, a student's ability and willingness to develop these skills throughout their college journey can help or hinder their on-going success. As such, Ontario colleges need to be proactive in recognizing the diverse needs of the learners who enter higher education at varying points in their life cycle, with varying backgrounds where emphasis on particular skills may be differently valued, or who enter without a full understanding of the skills needed to meet program expectations. These learners need to be met

with opportunities to understand and develop the skills necessary for post-secondary success, along with a college structure that is inclusive, welcoming, and creates spaces that foster a sense of belonging. It has been shown that specific non-cognitive skills impact certain facets of a learner's post-secondary journey (experiences, development, engagement, and decisions or ability to persist to graduation), but that a learner's journey can also be impacted (positively or negatively) by the structure of the institution and the welcoming nature of its community members regardless of skill level.

Nevertheless, it has been shown in this study that stakeholder groups, specifically, college staff, faculty members, and administrators believe non-cognitive skills are lacking at a recognizable level among today's college learner population. While, the students themselves hold mixed views. Student participants saw levels as *lacking*, *good*, or had a level of *unawareness*. Having a sense of awareness was shown to foster a greater understanding of the role and value non-cognitive skills have on the various facets of a learner's college journey, which, in turn, facilitates motivation to develop these skills. Moreover, awareness building was uncovered as being valuable for not only students, but also for those closest to them. Awareness among faculty members and staff was said to act as a reminder of how skills can be integrated into pedagogical practice and for self-awareness in modelling behaviour that fosters approachability and professionalism. Additionally, parental awareness of skills was said to be useful for reinforcing its value and encouraging learners to seek supports aimed at enhancing skill levels. However, both literature and conversations with participants have shown that the term 'soft skills' can be problematic because of the complexity and variety of skills that are categorized with the concept, along with the variety of synonyms associated with the term. As such, it can encompass different meaning for different people. The term 'soft skills' was

purposely used during participant interviews because it was believed to be more recognizable than other terms; however, it was seeing the soft-skills definitions on paper that allowed participants of this study the ability to reflect and connect them to behaviour and facets of post-secondary life more easily. Therefore, it is important that institutions create a shared definition of the concept and what it encompasses so that focus and clarity to the value these skills provide for success in post-secondary life can be achieved. As a result, I offer the following recommendations as a novel way to build awareness, enhance skill development for the purpose of fostering positive post-secondary journeys, the promotion of controlled decision-making, overall student success, retention, and work toward the development of global citizenry.

**Recommendations**

***Recommendation One: Plan, Integrate, and Embed Non-Cognitive Skills Development in all Facets of College Life - From Student Services to the Classroom***

As asserted in existing literature and reinforced in this study, transitional efforts are most effective when institution-wide. It is recommended that institutions develop a strategic plan for non-cognitive skill development that will permeate through all facets of the institution, both inside and outside of the classroom. The plan should be measurable and created with all institutional stakeholder groups (students, staff, faculty, administrators) to ensure a skill development plan that is holistic and considers the multiple touch points of a learner's journey. Therefore, institutions should consider the creation of a task force comprised of members from each stakeholder group to determine where opportunities for non-cognitive skill development lie and how best to implement them within the institution's structure. It is essential for cross-collaboration to occur between student services practitioners and faculty members, arguably the two employee groups of the college who spend the most time with learners. Marrying the two

worlds brings together educators with expertise in pedagogical practices within the classroom and outside of the classroom and will help enhance the seamless integration of skill development. An integrated venture will ensure groups work together for the scaffolding of skill development to occur starting prior to- and throughout college life.

*Recommendation Two: Raise Non-Cognitive Skills Awareness and Development Through Exposure and Education*

It was found that the awareness and value a person places on skills impacts their motivation to develop them. Moreover, the influence faculty members and parents have in promoting and modeling skills were recognized as contributing to how learners view and value skills. It is recommended that through exposure and education, institutions begin to build awareness of the positive impact non-cognitive skills have on student, work, and overall life successes. Although each institution is unique and should, therefore, consider an awareness campaign that best suits its institutional structure and needs, the following are overarching ideas and concepts meant to guide awareness development:

- **Spaces and events that foster discussion** – Consider implementing round table discussions or events that present an opportunity to hear different perspectives of how skills can be used in tangible ways.

- **Infuse the concept and value of non-cognitive skills into the college culture** – Institutions should first define non-cognitive skills and how they are effective in the education process and successful outcomes. This can be achieved by building the concept into the institution's strategic plan, vision statement, and, or, through institutional marketing. A marketing campaign aimed at all stakeholders, not just students, that provides visible definitions and educates the college community on the

importance of non-cognitive skills in one's academic, social, personal, and professional lives is recommended.

- **Offer classes, services, and supports aimed at developing non-cognitive skills** – the promotion of non-cognitive skills as a source of success would also warrant the implementation of recognizable supports for students seeking further development of these skills. This includes the consideration of classes or opportunities for learners to engage in experiences that might mirror 'gap year' encounters. For example, creating opportunities, possibly prior to a learner selecting a program or when students withdraw due to program uncertainty, that will foster components of self-reflection, work experience, discussion, and even travel.

### *Recommendation Three: Provide Upfront Disclosure of the Essential Skills Needed for Program and Student Success*

It is recommended that institutions set upfront expectations by posting and promoting the skills needed to thrive within their institution and the tools and ways students will be supported to achieve those skills prior to and during their college journey. The list must be seen as an opportunity to develop skills for success rather than a deterrent to education. This is where an awareness campaign that is inclusive of community members inside (staff, faculty, administrators) and outside (parents, employers, primary and secondary schools) of the physical institution will foster the development of partnership, expectations, and trust (between student and college). It is also recommended that institutions work with their school faculties and industry partners to determine and post recruitment material that outlines skills needed to thrive within each program, along with those associated with industry success. The transparency of how these skills are built within each program's pedagogy through co-op, capstone projects,

reflections, group work, or other program components will also help learners understand institutional expectations and how they support skill development.

**Future Research**

Much of existing research has explored the value of soft skills for workforce success or general life interactions beyond higher education. The perceptions of students, staff, faculty members, and administrators revealed in this study have begun to provide valuable insight into the impact of non-cognitive skills on successful student transitions, experiences, decision-making, and retention. As a next step, the three recommendations outlined in this study should be implemented in a college setting so that their outcomes can be measured. Furthermore, research that examines the impact of non-cognitive skills on the journey (experiences, development, engagement, and decisions or ability to persist to graduation) of current post-secondary learners across all Ontario colleges and universities should be conducted to gather similarities, differences, and for generalizable results. Stakeholder perceptions should be collected in this future research but extend beyond students, staff, faculty members, and administrators to include industry partners and parents to better understand where and how to bridge societal unawareness and foster skill development.

Future research should also explore the impact of partnerships between educational systems and industry partners to rethink and reshape the ways non-cognitive skill development occurs at various levels. Although elementary and secondary schools in Ontario currently assess student learning skills, while colleges use essential employability skills as a framework for curriculum development, recognizable skill gaps still exist. As a result, longitudinal research exploring integrated and on-going partnerships between various educational and industrial sectors should be conducted. Partnerships between elementary and secondary schools, secondary

and post-secondary schools, as well as post-secondary schools and industry partners that actively work to identify and implement pedagogy aimed at developing the current skills needed for successful transition at each stage of education and into the workforce, should be explored. The point is to develop the skills required for the next stage of education or life prior to each stage of transition and to assess its impact on learner preparedness, experiences, success, and retention rates.

**Final Words**

In my final words, I looked inward to reflect on the skills that propelled me through the sometimes challenging yet rewarding experiences I have encountered during my doctoral journey. I can wholeheartedly say that *motivation*, *perseverance*, *resilience*, *time management*, *flexibility*, *problem solving/critical thinking*, and *patience* were among the top skills that I felt helped me adapt and traverse through challenges I faced along the way. These skills were used to ignite and strengthen the need to work through my research, while working through a global pandemic and through professional and personal responsibilities that were at an all-time high. As such, this research has only fortified my understanding and belief in the impactful nature of non-cognitive skills on experiences, interactions, successful life outcomes, and personal well-being. It is time for us to reshape how we socialize and place value on non-cognitive skills in our educational systems. It is time to build awareness!

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A: Interview Schedule – Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**

| Stage 1 – Introduction: |
| --- |
| The interviewer welcomes the participant and thanks him/her for their interest in participating in the study.<br><br>The interviewer provides the participant with an Informed Consent form and informs the participant that before starting the interview, the Informed Consent must be agreed to by saying:<br><br>*Please read this Informed Consent form and feel free to ask me any questions that you might have about it.  I am here to clarify any questions you have.*<br><br>The interviewer will clarify any questions the participant might have before starting the interview.<br><br>The interviewer will then check to ensure that the participant has signed the Informed Consent form before proceeding. If the consent is not signed, the researcher will advise the participant that a signature is required for acknowledgement of their consent.  The interviewer will say:<br><br>*Before proceeding with the interview, I am required to obtain a signed Informed Consent form from you.  However, if you no longer wish to participate in the study then we will not proceed.*<br><br>If the participant signs the Informed Consent form, then the interviewer will place it in a folder and advise the participant that:<br><br>*A copy of the Informed Consent form will be emailed to you within 48 hours of this interview.* |
| **Stage 2 – Overview and Purpose of Interview/Study:** |
| *Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and study. I am going to ask you a series of questions about your perceptions of college learners based on your experiences. There are no right or wrong answers.  I am truly interested in your opinion as someone who has worked with students.  Feel free to elaborate as much as you can and/or raise items I may not have captured in my questions.  Again, you will not be named in the study and any identifying information I receive with be kept confidential.* |
| **Stage 3 – First Round of Questions – Demographic/Icebreaker:** |
| The interviewer informs the participant that:<br><br>*The first few questions that I will ask is to get to know you, your role at the college, and how your role at the college has shaped your interactions and/or experiences with students.*<br><br>    1.  Can you tell me a bit about your current role at the college and any other roles you've held in a post-secondary environment? |

*Possible prompts:* How many years have you worked in a college environment?
What fields of study have you taught/currently teach?

2. How have these roles shaped the way you interact with students?
*Possible prompts:* Have you had many interactions with students? What might this look like?
Any examples?

**Stage 4 – Second Round of Questions – General discussion of skill levels, values, role:**

3. Do you believe there are particular skills students need to achieve success at the college?
*Possible prompts:* What are they? Why do you believe this? Can you elaborate on how you
define as 'success'?

4. Can you discuss whether you feel today's student population are lacking any skills?
*Prompts:* Are there particular skills that you can talk about?  Can you provide
examples/reasons for feeling this way?  Do you believe there are differences (in skills) among
student groups? Ex. between programs, years of study, domestic/international, etc.? Why do
you feel this is?

**Stage 5 – Brief discussion of soft-skills, how it is defined in this study, and clarification:**

In this stage of the interview the researcher will address the focus of the study and provide
clarification of the term soft-skills for achieving mutual understanding.  The interviewer will
say:

*This study's focus is on soft-skills and how it might impact a learner's post-secondary
journey. When I refer to soft-skills I am essentially talking about '…any skill or individual
trait that assists in, or is vital to, effective interactions with others.' You may be familiar with
other terms used to describe soft-skills, such as transferable skills, employability skills, or
non-cognitive skills. Some examples of these skills include, but are not limited to, an ability to,
work well with others, communicate (written and oral), self-regulate, work independently,
persevere, think critically, think rationally, manage time effectively, and an ability to adapt to
a variety of situations.*

The interviewer provides the participant with a list of soft-skills and permits time for the
participant to review and ask any questions they might have about the list. The interviewer
then says:

*This is not an all-inclusive list, so there might be other soft-skills that you have in mind or that
you might think of during this interview.  Please feel free to add (them) as we continue our
conversation.*

**Stage 6 – Third Round of Questions – Discussion about impact of soft-skills on the
student journey:**

*There are four main areas that that I would like to address with you that relate to a learner's*

*college journey. The areas include student experiences at the college, a student's personal and academic development, their academic and social engagement with their school, and their ability to remain in school and persist to graduation.*

6. I'm interested in learning from you how you feel skills might impact how a student experiences the college. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's college experiences*?

*Possible prompts: Do you feel having particular skills (or lacking particular skills) can influence how a student experiences college? Why? Can you provide examples?*

7. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's development*?

*Possible prompts: (this can be personal and/or academic development)*

8. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's engagement with their college (academic and social)*?

*Possible prompts:* Are there particular skills you feel are important for students to engage in group work? Complete assignments? Interact with their professors/staff/resources? To seek out resources/student services? To form friendships? To participate in events?

9. Considering the list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's decisions/ability to remain in school and persist to graduation*?

*Possible prompts:* Do you believe having particular skills can impact a learner's decision-making?

10. What could be done to improve soft-skills in college students?
*Possible prompts:* Should something be done? Why? Why not?

**Stage 7 – Wrap-up:**

1. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you wish to share?

Interviewer concludes the interview by thanking the participant for their time, reminds participant that they will receive a transcript of the interview for them to verify and to ensure what they wanted to say was captured, and provides a $25 Tim Horton's gift card. The interviewer says:

*Thank you again for your time and insight provided. I will be sending along the completed transcription of this interview by November 19th for you to verify its accuracy and to ensure that what was captured actually reflects your views. Here is a gift card as a token of my appreciation.*

**Overarching Research Questions:**

1.  *What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners?*

2.  *How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and decisions to persist to graduation)?*

**Appendix B: Interview Schedule – Students**

| **Stage 1 – Introduction:** |
|---|
| The interviewer welcomes the participant and thanks him/her for their interest in participating in the study. |

The interviewer provides the participant with an Informed Consent form and informs the participant that before starting the interview, the Informed Consent must be agreed to by saying:

*Please read this Informed Consent form and feel free to ask me any questions that you might have about it.  I am here to clarify any questions you have.*

The interviewer will clarify any questions the participant might have before starting the interview.

The interviewer will then check to ensure that the participant has signed the Informed Consent form before proceeding. If the consent is not signed, the researcher will advise the participant that a signature is required for acknowledgement of their consent.  The interviewer will say:

*Before proceeding with the interview, I am required to obtain a signed Informed Consent form from you.  However, if you no longer wish to participate in the study then we will not proceed.*

If the participant signs the Informed Consent form, then the interviewer will place it in a folder and advise the participant that:

*A copy of the Informed Consent form will be emailed to you within 48 hours of this interview.*

| **Stage 2 – Overview and Purpose of Interview/Study:** |
|---|

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and study. I am going to ask you a series of questions about your perceptions of college learners based on your experiences. There are no right or wrong answers.  I am truly interested in your opinion as student and as someone who interacts with other students.  Feel free to elaborate as much as you can and/or raise items I may not have captured in my questions.  Again, you will not be named in the study and any identifying information I receive with be kept confidential.*

| **Stage 3 – First Round of Questions – Demographic/Icebreaker:** |
|---|
| The interviewer informs the participant that: |

*The first few questions that I will ask is to get to know you and about the student experience.*

    1.  Can you tell me what it is like to be a student?
*Possible prompts:* Is this your first year? How has it been so far?

    2.  Is college life how you thought it would be?
*Possible prompts:* How so? What didn't you anticipate? Have you had many interactions with

college members: staff/faculty/other students?

**Stage 4 – Second Round of Questions – General discussion of skill levels, values, role:**

1. Do you believe there are particular skills students need to achieve success at the college?

*Possible prompts:* What are they? Why do you believe this? Can you elaborate on how you define as 'success'?

2. Can you discuss whether you feel today's student population are lacking any skills?

*Possible prompts:* Are there particular skills that you can talk about? Can you provide examples/reasons for feeling this way? Do you believe there are differences (in skills) among student groups? Ex. between programs, years of study, domestic/international, etc.? Why do you feel this is?

**Stage 5 – Brief discussion of soft-skills, how it is defined in this study, and clarification:**

In this stage of the interview the researcher will address the focus of the study and provide clarification of the term soft-skills for achieving mutual understanding. The interviewer will say:

*This study's focus is on soft-skills and how it might impact a learner's post-secondary journey. When I refer to soft-skills I am essentially talking about '…any skill or individual trait that assists in, or is vital to, effective interactions with others.' You may be familiar with other terms used to describe soft-skills, such as transferable skills, employability skills, or non-cognitive skills. Some examples of these skills include, but are not limited to, an ability to work well with others, communicate (written and oral), self-regulate, work independently, persevere, think critically, think rationally, manage time effectively, and an ability to adapt to a variety of situations.*

The interviewer provides the participant with a list of soft-skills and permits time for the participant to review and ask any questions they might have about the list. The interviewer then says:

*This is not an all-inclusive list, so there might be other soft-skills that you have in mind or that you might think of during this interview. Please feel free to add (them) as we continue our conversation.*

**Stage 6 – Third Round of Questions – Discussion about impact of soft-skills on the student journey:**

*There are four main areas that that I would like to address with you that relate to a learner's college journey. The areas include student experiences at the college, a student's personal and academic development, their academic and social engagement with their school, and their ability to remain in school and persist to graduation.*

1. I'm interested in learning from you how you feel skills might impact how a student

experiences the college.  Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share with me your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's college experiences*?

*Possible prompts: Do you feel having particular skills (or lacking particular skills) can influence how a student experiences college? Why? Examples?*

2. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's development*?

*Possible prompts: (this can be personal and/or academic development)*

3. Considering the soft-skills list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's engagement (academic and social)*?

*Possible prompts:* Are there particular skills that you have used or feel are important…to engage in group work? Complete assignments? Interact with your professors? To seek out resources/student services? To form friendships? To participate in events?

4. Considering the list, and/or any other skills that come to mind, can you please share your thoughts on soft-skills and its impact on a *student's decisions/ability to remain in school and persist to graduation*?

*Possible prompts:* Do you believe having particular skills can impact a learner's decision-making?

5. What could be done to improve soft-skills in college students?

*Possible prompts:* Should something be done? Why? Why not?

**Stage 7 – Wrap-up:**

1. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you wish to share?

Interviewer provides the participant with the mini-demographic questionnaire and says:

*This is a questionnaire to gather background information to best understand the college demographic, how you are affiliated with the college, and to capture whether you have had previous experiences in a college/university setting. It is completely optional; however, it will add important depth to your story. Please read through it and complete any questions you are comfortable with answering.*

Interviewer concludes the interview by thanking the participant for their time, reminds participant that they will receive a transcript of the interview for them to verify and to ensure what they wanted to say was captured, and provides a $25 Tim Horton's gift card. The interviewer says:

*Thank you again for your time and insight provided. I will be sending along the completed transcription of this interview by November 19th for you to verify its accuracy and to ensure that what was captured actually reflects your views.  Here is a gift card as a token of my appreciation.*

**Overarching Research Questions:**

1. *What are the perceptions of institutional stakeholders on the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in college learners?*

2. *How do college stakeholders perceive non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) are impacting the post-secondary journey of students (experiences, development, engagement and decisions to persist to graduation)?*

**Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire – Students**

University of Windsor

Name: _____     Date: _____

This research has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board.  The following questionnaire is meant to gather background information to best understand the college demographic, how you are affiliated with the college, and to capture whether you have had previous experiences in a college/university setting. Feel free to ask for clarification.

1. What is your current year of study?

☐  1st year

☐  2nd year

☐  3rd year

☐  4th year

☐  5th year or above

2. Is this the first college/university program you have enrolled in?

☐  Yes

☐  No

3. If no, how many post-secondary programs have you enrolled in?

☐  2 – this number includes my current program and one other program.

☐  3 – this number includes my current program and two other programs.

☐  4 or more – this number includes my current program and at <u>least</u> three other programs.

☐  N/A

2.   What type of program(s) have you previously enrolled in? Please check all that apply.

☐ I previously attended a different program(s) at this college

☐ I previously attended a different college(s)

☐ I previously attended university

☐ Other (please specify) _____

☐ N/A

3. Did you complete the previous program(s) you were enrolled in (and earn the credential)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other, please specify_____

☐ N/A

4. Please select your age category:

☐ 17 years or less

☐ 18-24 years

☐ 25-35 years

☐ 36 years or more

☐ I prefer not to answer

5. Please specify the gender you identify with:

_____

☐ I prefer not to answer

6. Do you identify with any of the following groups? Please select all that apply.

☐ First in your family to attend college/university

☐ Visible minority

☐ Indigenous (i.e. First Nations, Inuit, Metis)

☐ LGBTQ

☐ Accessible Needs: __mental health __physical __learning

☐ Other group you wish to specify _____

☐ I prefer not to answer

7. Please identify the service scenarios that you identify with. Select all that apply.

☐ I had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in high school, but I have <u>not</u> accessed the Accessible Learning Services at the College

☐ I had an Individualized Education Plan/Program (IEP) in high school, but have chosen <u>not</u> to access accommodations at the College.

    o Please specify why_____

☐ I have registered with Accessible Learning Services and have accommodations that I utilize

☐ I have registered with Accessible Learning Services and have an accommodations plan that I have <u>not</u> utilized

☐ I have accessed personal counseling support at the college

☐ I have accessed career counseling support at the college

☐ I have accessed advising support (academic or general advising) at the college

☐ I have accessed other supports at the college

    o Please specify_____

☐ I prefer not to answer

8. Which category best describes your current student status?

☐ International student

☐ Domestic student

☐ Other (please specify) _____

9. Which category best describes your current enrolment status?

☐ Full-time student

☐ Part-time student

☐ Taking classes via Continuing Education

☐ Other (please specify) _____

10. What type of college program are you currently enrolled in? *Please select one.*

&#9633; Diploma (2 years)

&#9633; Advanced Diploma (3 years)

&#9633; Degree

&#9633; Certificate

&#9633; Other (please specify) _____

11. What is the name of the college program you are currently enrolled in?

_____

**Appendix D: Introduction and Invitation to Participate – Staff/Faculty/Administrators**

*Subject line:* Soft-Skills Study - You're Invited!



Dear Colleague,

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study that seeks to investigate the perceived impact of soft-skills (or lack thereof) on a student's academic and social journey at the college and on their decision to remain enrolled in school. The goal of this research study is to gain insight into the opinions of various members of the college community (students, staff, administrators, and faculty members) in hopes of getting closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and engagement with their school.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-time one-on-one interview that will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours in duration and will be audio recorded. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon location, that is most likely to take place at your preferred campus.

- Discuss your experiences working in the college environment.

- Review the transcription of your interview within two weeks of receipt to ensure that your experiences and perceptions were accurately captured.

The one-on-one meetings will be scheduled on a date and time that is most convenient for you. Participants will receive a $25 Tim Hortons gift card as a token of appreciation.

This study has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board, and is being conducted by Nicole Lee under the supervision of Dr. Geri Salinitri from the University of Windsor.

If you are interested in participating in this study and/or if you would like any further information about the study, please contact the Principal Investigator by sending an email to: XXX@uwindsor.ca

Thank you kindly for your consideration.

Sincerely,


Nicole Lee, BA, MAEd
PhD Candidate, Cognition and Learning
Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

**Appendix E: Introduction and Invitation to Participate – Students**

*Subject line:* Soft-Skills Study - You're Invited!



Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to investigate the perceived impact of soft-skills (or lack thereof) on a student's academic and social journey at the college and on their decision to remain enrolled in school. The goal of this research study is to gain insight into the opinions of various members of the college community (diploma students, staff, administrators, and faculty members) in hopes of getting closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and engagement with their school.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-time one-on-one interview that will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours in duration and will be audio recorded. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon location, that is most likely to take place at your preferred campus.

- Discuss your experiences as a student. You will also be asked optional demographic questions.

- Review the transcription of your interview within two weeks of receipt to ensure that your experiences and perceptions were accurately captured.

The one-on-one meetings will be scheduled on a date and time that is most convenient for you. Participants will receive a $25 Tim Hortons gift card as a token of appreciation.

This research has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board, and is being conducted by Nicole Lee under the supervision of Dr. Geri Salinitri from the University of Windsor.

If you are interested in participating in this study and/or if you would like any further information about the study, please contact the Principal Investigator by sending an email to: XXX@uwindsor.ca

Thank you kindly for your consideration.
Sincerely,

Nicole Lee, BA, MAEd
PhD Candidate, Cognition and Learning
Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

**Appendix F: Email Response: To potential participants who have expressed interest in study**



Thanks so much for your interest in my research study!  I have attached a Letter of Information that provides more detail about the study.  After reviewing the letter of information, if still interested, I would like to set up a date and time for our meeting.


Looking forward to hearing from you.


Best,



Nicole Lee, BA, MAEd
PhD Candidate, Cognition and Learning
Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

**Appendix G: Letter of Information for Consent to Participate in Research – Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**



# LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH (Staff, Faculty, Administrator)

Title of Study: *Through the Eyes of Many: The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey (Experiences, Development, Engagement, and Retention)*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by *Nicole Lee*, from the *Faculty of Education* at the University of Windsor. This study has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethic Board. The results from this research study will contribute to Nicole Lee's doctoral dissertation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Nicole Lee: Principal Investigator at XXX@uwindsor.ca or Dr. Geri Salinitri: Faculty Supervisor at (519) 253-3000 ext. XXXX.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived impact of non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) on a student's academic and social journey at the college and on their decision to remain enrolled in school. The goal of this research study is to gain insight into the opinions of various members of the college community (diploma students, staff, administrators, and faculty members) in hopes of getting closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and engagement with their school.

## PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in a one-time one-on-one interview that will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours in duration and will be audio recorded. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon location, that is most likely to take place at your preferred campus.
- Consent to the audio-recording of the interview. Please note that your name will not be revealed to anyone and that your recording will be kept confidential and stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- Discuss your experiences working in the college environment.
- Review the transcription of your interview within two weeks of receipt to ensure that your experiences and perceptions were accurately captured.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks to taking part in this research study other than what you would experience in everyday life. However, you may experience discomfort with questions relating to your experiences or demographic information. If at any time you feel discomfort, you can ask for the recording to be stopped and choose whether or not you wish to continue in the study.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The results of the study may prove beneficial in alerting the college to potential improvements around student success strategies and to program development, which could prove beneficial to current and future students. On a wider scale, this research could build upon student retention theories that suggest engaging socially and academically with one's school increases the likelihood of persistence to graduation. This research study could get closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and ability to engage with their school.

## COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

As a token of appreciation for your time, you will be provided with a $25 Tim Horton's gift card upon completion of the interview.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission. Given the personal nature of this research and the unique stories that might be shared, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but will be maximized through the following methods:  All information gathered from the interview that will be used in the research report or subsequent publications will be made anonymous by removing or substituting names or other identifying factors.  All data collected, including audio recordings, consent forms, transcriptions, and the master list outlining all data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Data collected electronically will be stored on both a USB key and on the investigator's password protected laptop.  The USB key will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Some data collected may be viewed by members of the investigator's dissertation committee as part of the research process.  Data that cannot be anonymized or de-identified, such as email communication and audio recordings, will be will be appropriately shredded and/or erased. Email communication will be destroyed within one month following completion of the study, while audio recordings will be destroyed once participants have returned their transcriptions. Study participants will be provided with a copy of their transcribed interview and will have two-weeks to review and provide any changes, if applicable, to the investigator.

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you sign this consent form, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the investigator. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed. Withdrawal of data can no longer occur once interview transcriptions have been reviewed and returned to the investigator. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The study findings will be made available to participants of this study upon request. To request a copy of the findings, you can send an email to the investigator using the email address listed below.

Email address: lee16f@uwindsor.ca
Date when results are available: Summer 2020

## SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

## SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.


_____          _____
Signature of Investigator                                              Date

**Appendix H: Letter of Information for Consent to Participate in Research - Student**



# LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: *Through the Eyes of Many: The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey (Experiences, Development, Engagement, and Retention)*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by *Nicole Lee*, from the *Faculty of Education* at the University of Windsor. This study has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethic Board. The results from this research study will contribute to Nicole Lee's doctoral dissertation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Nicole Lee: Principal Investigator at XXX@uwindsor.ca or Dr. Geri Salinitri: Faculty Supervisor at (519) 253-3000 ext. XXXX.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived impact of non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) on a student's academic and social journey at the college and on their decision to remain enrolled in school. The goal of this research study is to gain insight into the opinions of various members of the college community (diploma students, staff, administrators, and faculty members) in hopes of getting closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and engagement with their school.

## PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-time one-on-one interview that will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours in duration and will be audio recorded. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon location, that is most likely to take place at your preferred campus.
- Consent to the audio-recording of the interview. Please note that your name will not be revealed to anyone and that your recording will be kept confidential and stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- Discuss your experiences as a student. There will also be optional demographic questions asked.
- Review the transcription of your interview within two weeks of receipt to ensure that your experiences and perceptions were accurately captured.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks to taking part in this research study other than what you would experience in everyday life. However, you may experience discomfort with questions relating to your experiences or demographic information. If at any time you feel discomfort, you can ask for the recording to be stopped and choose whether or not you wish to continue in the study.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The results of the study may prove beneficial in alerting the college to potential improvements around student success strategies and to program development, which could prove beneficial to current and future students. On a wider scale, this research could build upon student retention theories that suggest engaging socially and academically with one's school increases the likelihood of persistence to graduation. This research study could get closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and ability to engage with their school.

## COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

As a token of appreciation for your time, you will be provided with a $25 Tim Horton's gift card upon completion of the interview.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission. Given the personal nature of this research and the unique stories that might be shared, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but will be maximized through the following methods: All information gathered from the interview that will be used in the research report or subsequent publications will be made anonymous by removing or substituting names or other identifying factors. All data collected, including audio recordings, consent forms, transcriptions, and the master list outlining all data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Data collected electronically will be stored on both a USB key and on the investigator's password protected laptop. The USB key will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Some data collected may be viewed by members of the investigator's dissertation committee as part of the research process. Data that cannot be anonymized or de-identified, such as email communication and audio recordings, will be will be appropriately shredded and/or erased. Email communication will be destroyed within one month following completion of the study, while audio recordings will be destroyed once participants have returned their transcriptions. Study participants will be provided with a copy of their transcribed interview and will have two-weeks to review and provide any changes, if applicable, to the investigator.

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you sign this consent form, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the investigator. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed. Withdrawal of data can no longer occur once interview transcriptions have been reviewed and returned to the investigator. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The study findings will be made available to participants of this study upon request. To request a copy of the findings, you can send an email to the investigator using the email address listed below.

Email address: XXX@uwindsor.ca
Date when results are available: Summer 2020

## SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

## SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

_____        _____

Signature of Investigator                                                    Date

**Appendix I: Thank you Email:  Those who express interest, but participant quota already reached**

*Subject line:* Thank you…

University of Windsor

Dear_____,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study titled *Through the Eyes of Many: The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey*.  I have received an overwhelming response to my request for participants and as a result I currently have no more participant spots available.   However, a summary of the results can be made available to you if you are interested. Please feel free to contact me should you wish to receive a link to the results.  Results should be available in Summer 2020.

Thank you again for your interest.

Sincerely,

Nicole Lee, BA, MAEd
PhD Candidate, Cognition and Learning
Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

**Appendix J: Consent to Participate in Research – Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**



## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH (Staff, Faculty, Administrator)

Title of Study: *Through the Eyes of Many: The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey (Experiences, Development, Engagement, and Retention)*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by *Nicole Lee*, from the *Faculty of Education* at the University of Windsor. This study has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board. The results from this research study will contribute to Nicole Lee's doctoral dissertation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Nicole Lee: Principal Investigator at XXX@uwindsor.ca or Dr. Geri Salinitri: Faculty Supervisor at (519) 253-3000 ext. XXXX.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived impact of non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) on a student's academic and social journey at the college and on their decision to remain enrolled in school. The goal of this research study is to gain insight into the opinions of various members of the college community (students, staff, administrators, and faculty members) in hopes of getting closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and engagement with their school.

## PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in a one-time one-on-one interview that will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours in duration. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon location, that is most likely to take place at your preferred campus.
- Consent to the audio-recording of the interview. Please note that your name will not be revealed to anyone and that your recording will be kept confidential and stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- Discuss your experiences working in the college environment.
- Review the transcription of your interview within two weeks of receipt to ensure that your experiences and perceptions were accurately captured.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks to taking part in this research study other than what you would experience in everyday life. However, you may experience discomfort with questions relating to your experiences. If at any time you feel discomfort, you can ask for the recording to be stopped and choose whether or not you wish to continue in the study.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The results of the study may prove beneficial in alerting the college to potential improvements around student success strategies and to program development, which could prove beneficial to current and future students. On a wider scale, this research could build upon student retention theories that suggest engaging socially and academically with one's school increases the likelihood of persistence to graduation. This research study could get closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and ability to engage with their school.

## COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

As a token of appreciation for your time, you will be provided with a $25 Tim Horton's gift card upon completion of the interview.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Given the personal nature of this research and the unique stories that might be shared, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but will be maximized through the following methods:  All information gathered from the interview that will be used in the research report or subsequent publications will be made anonymous by removing or substituting names or other identifying factors.  All data collected, including audio recordings, consent forms, transcriptions, and the master list outlining all data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Data collected electronically will be stored on both a USB key and on the investigator's password protected laptop.  The USB key will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Some data collected may be viewed by members of the investigator's dissertation committee as part of the research process.  Data that cannot be anonymized or de-identified, such as email communication and audio recordings, will be appropriately shredded and/or erased. Email communication will be destroyed within one month following completion of the study, while audio recordings will be destroyed once participants have returned their transcriptions.  Study participants will be provided with a copy of their transcribed interview and will have two-weeks to review and provide any changes, if applicable, to the investigator.

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you sign this consent form, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the investigator. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed. Withdrawal of data can no longer occur once interview transcriptions have been reviewed and returned to the investigator. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The study findings will be made available to participants of this study upon request. To request a copy of the findings, you can send an email to the investigator using the email address listed below.

Email address: XXX@uwindsor.ca
Date when results are available: Summer 2020

## SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:  Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail:  ethics@uwindsor.ca

## SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study *Through the Eyes of Many: The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey (Experiences, Development, Engagement, and Retention)* as described herein.  My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study.  I have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Name of Participant


_____          _____
Signature of Participant                                              Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.


_____  _____
Signature of Investigator                                                                Date

**Appendix K: Consent to Participate in Research – Student**



## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH (Student)

Title of Study: *Through the Eyes of Many: The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey (Experiences, Development, Engagement, and Retention)*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by *Nicole Lee*, from the *Faculty of Education* at the University of Windsor. This study has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethic Board. The results from this research study will contribute to Nicole Lee's doctoral dissertation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Nicole Lee: Principal Investigator at XXX@uwindsor.ca or Dr. Geri Salinitri: Faculty Supervisor at (519) 253-3000 ext. XXXX.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived impact of non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof) on a student's academic and social journey at the college and on their decision to remain enrolled in school. The goal of this research study is to gain insight into the opinions of various members of the college community (students, staff, administrators, and faculty members) in hopes of getting closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and engagement with their school.

## PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in a one-time one-on-one interview that will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours in duration. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon location, that is most likely to take place at your preferred campus.
- Consent to the audio-recording of the interview. Please note that your name will not be revealed to anyone and that your recording will be kept confidential and stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- Discuss your experiences as a student. There will also be optional demographic questions asked.
- Review the transcription of your interview within two weeks of receipt to ensure that your experiences and perceptions were accurately captured.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks to taking part in this research study other than what you would experience in everyday life. However, you may experience discomfort with questions relating to your experiences or demographic information. If at any time you feel discomfort, you can ask for the recording to be stopped and choose whether or not you wish to continue in the study.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The results of the study may prove beneficial in alerting the college to potential improvements around student success strategies and to program development, which could prove beneficial to current and future students. On a wider scale, this research could build upon student retention theories that suggest engaging socially and

academically with one's school increases the likelihood of persistence to graduation. This research study could get closer to understanding the underlying factors that impact a student's transition and ability to engage with their school.

## COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

As a token of appreciation for your time, you will be provided with a $25 Tim Horton's gift card upon completion of the interview.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Given the personal nature of this research and the unique stories that might be shared, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but will be maximized through the following methods:  All information gathered from the interview that will be used in the research report or subsequent publications will be made anonymous by removing or substituting names or other identifying factors.  All data collected, including audio recordings, consent forms, transcriptions, and the master list outlining all data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Data collected electronically will be stored on both a USB key and on the investigator's password protected laptop.  The USB key will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Some data collected may be viewed by members of the investigator's dissertation committee as part of the research process.  Data that cannot be anonymized or de-identified, such as email communication and audio recordings, will be will be appropriately shredded and/or erased. Email communication will be destroyed within one month following completion of the study, while audio recordings will be destroyed once participants have returned their transcriptions.  Study participants will be provided with a copy of their transcribed interview and will have two-weeks to review and provide any changes, if applicable, to the investigator.

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you sign this consent form, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the investigator. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed. Withdrawal of data can no longer occur once interview transcriptions have been reviewed and returned to the investigator. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The study findings will be made available to participants of this study upon request. To request a copy of the findings, you can send an email to the investigator using the email address listed below.

Email address: XXX@uwindsor.ca
Date when results are available: Summer 2020

## SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:  Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

## SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study *Through the Eyes of Many: The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey (Experiences, Development, Engagement, and Retention)* as described herein.  My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study.  I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant


_____          _____

Signature of Participant                                                     Date

## SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.


_____          _____

Signature of Investigator                                                   Date

**Appendix L: Transcription Review Email**

*Subject line:* Please Review: Transcription of Audio Recording



Dear _____,


Attached you will find a transcription of the audio recording of our interview.  I have sent this email with a read-receipt to ensure that you have received your transcription. Please review the transcription to ensure your intended message has been captured.  You can make any needed modifications you feel are necessary to accurately tell your story.  I ask that you return your reviewed transcription to me by _____.  If you require more time to review, please let me know.  I will be sending you a reminder email in a week.  However, if I do not receive a response from you by _____, I will assume that no changes to the transcription are needed.

I can be contacted at XXX@uwindsor.ca should you have any questions.  Thank you kindly for your continued time and participation in this research study.



Sincerely,



Nicole Lee, BA, MAEd
PhD Candidate, Cognition and Learning
Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

**Appendix M: Transcription Review: Email Reminder**

*Subject line:* Reminder – Transcription Review due _____



Dear _____,

The transcription of the audio recording of our interview was sent to you on _____ for review.   I have sent this email with a read-receipt to ensure that you have received your transcription and this reminder email.  If you have reviewed your transcription and do not feel that any changes are necessary, then please ignore this email.  If you would like to submit changes to the transcription, please review, modify where necessary, and email any changes to me by _____.   If you require more time to review, please let me know.  However, if I do not receive a response from you by  _____, I will assume that no changes to the transcription are needed.

I can be contacted at XXX@uwindsor.ca should you have any questions.  Thank you kindly for your continued time and participation in this research study.

Sincerely,

Nicole Lee, BA, MAEd
PhD Candidate, Cognition and Learning
Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

**Appendix N: List of Soft Skills**



| Common examples of Soft Skills |
| --- |
| **Flexibility** – an ability to adapt to various situations. This includes an ability to adjust to various teaching styles. |
| **Written Communication** |
| **Oral Communication** |
| **Independence** |
| **Problem Solving/Critical Thinking** |
| **Teamwork** – an ability to work well with others in groups. |
| **Motivation** |
| **Time Management –** an ability to manage one's time effectively. |
| **Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility** |
| **Self-confidence** |
| **Self-regulation** – an ability to manage emotions and impulsive behaviours. |
| **Resilience –** an ability to work through or recover from challenging situations. |
| **Self-advocacy** – an ability to speak up for one's self. |
| **Conflict management** – an ability to resolve or reduce conflict. |
| **Coping** skills – an ability to deal with various stressors. |

**Appendix O: Comparison of Skills Perceived as Lacking Among Current Students and Upon Graduation**

| Stakeholder Group | Results of This Study<br><br>(Skills perceived to be lacking in current students) | Existing Literature<br><br>(Skills perceived to be lacking upon graduation)<br><br>Results from studies that include: Biss and Pichette (2018); Taylor (2016) |
|---|---|---|
| Students | Coping, life skills (includes nutrition), **organizational skills**, motivation, **problem solving/critical thinking**, self-awareness | Client management, conflict management, creative/innovative thinking, decision making, flexibility, leadership, oral communication, **organization/time management**, **problem solving/critical thinking/multi-disciplinary thinking**, self confidence, self-management teamwork, work ethic/personal responsibility, written communication |
| Staff | Coping skills, flexibility, perseverance, problem solving/critical thinking, work ethic/personal responsibility | N/A |
| Faculty Members | Independence, **oral communication**, problem solving/critical thinking, *mathematical skills\**, self-confidence, *technical skills\**, **written communication** | Client management, decision-making, **oral communication**, negotiation, professionalism, self-management, teamwork, time management/punctuality, willingness to learn, work ethic/integrity, **written communication** |
| Administrators | Attention to detail, life skills, patience, problem solving/critical skills, self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-regulation, time management | N/A |

*\*Commonly considered hard skills*

**Appendix P: Perceived Impact of Non-Cognitive Skills on the College Journey**

| Non-Cognitive Skill/Soft Skill | Perceived Impact on College Journey |
| --- | --- |
| Adaptability | • Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement |
| Conflict Management | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Coping Skills | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Flexibility | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Independence | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Motivation | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Oral Communication | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Perseverance | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Problem Solving/Critical Thinking | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Resilience | • Academic Development<br>• Personal Development |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • College Experience<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Self-Advocacy | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Self-Awareness/Self-Reflection | • College Experience<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Self-Confidence | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Self-Regulation | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Teamwork/Group work | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Time Management | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Work Ethic/Personal Responsibility | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Decision Making/Retention |
| Written Communication | • College Experience<br>• Personal Development<br>• Academic Development<br>• Student Engagement<br>• Decision Making/Retention |

**Vita Auctoris**

Nicole E. Lee was born in North York (Toronto), Ontario. She completed an interdisciplinary Bachelor's degree in Business, Political Science, and Mathematics (B.A.) from York University located in North York (Toronto), Ontario in 2002. In 2016, she obtained her Master's degree in Education (MAEd) from Central Michigan University located in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. Nicole is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Windsor where she hopes to achieve her PhD in Educational Studies in 2021.