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Exploring Predicted Vs. Actual First to-Second Year Retention Rates: A Study of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Colleges

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EXPLORING PREDICTED VS. ACTUAL FIRST-TO-SECOND

YEAR RETENTION RATES:

A STUDY OF EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA COLLEGES

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To my father and mother —
for teaching me that I can always strive to do more.

To Terry —
for never-ending encouragement and patience.

And to Rick, Allison and Sarah —
for years of loving support.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Student persistence in college has been a topic of significance for several decades and is an area of growing concern on nearly every college campus. Why do some students enroll in college only to leave before reaching their goal of earning a degree? Are colleges failing their students in some way that results in student attrition? These are relevant questions on every campus, both to private institutions whose primary income stream is dependent on tuition paid by students and by public institutions whose enrollments determine state budget funding. As of 2007, only 56.1% of students who enter colleges and universities in the United States with the intent of graduating with a bachelor's degree persist to graduation in six years or less (Lee & Rawls, 2010, p. 141). According to Swail (2004), the problem is long term and pervasive. "Over the past 50 years," he cites, "college enrollment has increased about sevenfold, yet average graduation rates for four-year colleges have basically held constant at about 50 percent and have been as low as 34 percent at two-year colleges" (para. 2).

This lack of student persistence poses great challenges for students and their parents, for potential employers, and certainly for colleges and universities. State and federal governments spent an estimated $9 billion between 2003 and 2008 on first-time, full-time freshmen who enrolled in four-year colleges and later dropped out of college (Kelderman, 2010). This cost represents $6.2 billion in state appropriations for colleges

and universities, more than $1.4 billion in student grants from the states and $1.5 billion in federal grants to the students who failed to return to campus for a second year (AIR, 2010). As huge as this cost is, it would be considerably larger if part-time students, students who transfer to another institution, or students enrolling in two-year institutions were considered. Clearly, stronger persistence rates would result directly in billions of dollars that could be redirected to other initiatives to benefit society. Additionally, the indirect benefit of having a more highly educated population would benefit the public.

Multiple stakeholders with an interest in student persistence in college exist. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) frame it thus,

> The subject… educational attainment in the United States – could not be
> more timely. Academics, framers of public policy, and journalists are
> united in bemoaning the failure of the United States in recent years to
> continue building the human capital it needs to satisfy economic, social,
> and political needs. (p. 1)

Students are arguably the most important in the discussion of student persistence as their lifetime earnings are dramatically affected by their degree attainment. Earning a college degree is a wise investment in one's future. College graduates earn more than college dropouts and college dropouts earn more than those who end their education after earning their high school diploma. According to the College Completion Agenda 2011 Progress Report (Lee, Edwards, Menson, & Rawls, 2011), the median annual income in 2009 for college graduates was $53,483 while the median income for college dropouts was $39,110 and the median income for high school graduates was only $34,594. In just one year, college graduates earned 40% more than college dropouts and 62% more than high school graduates. Compounded over a lifetime, these earning differences are

significant, and the gap in income levels by degree attainment continues to grow (College Board, 2010).

Additionally, the process of transferring to another institution is a costly endeavor. Students who leave the college in which they initially enroll and who continue their studies at another institution tend to endure emotional, financial and academic challenges. Curricular requirements vary from one institution to another, so transferring frequently adds both time and cost to earning a degree. Students are more likely to graduate in four years if they follow one consistent curriculum as opposed to trying to integrate multiple college curricula from two or more colleges or universities. Further, transferring from one institution to another leaves students in a transformative social situation for a longer than desired period of time (Milen, 1997). Milen's description of how students separate from one environment and acculturate into a new campus highlights the potential emotional strain of moving from one campus to another.

Society in general also benefits when it has more college graduates. Intellectual ability and skills of college graduates contribute to a stronger community in many ways, including greater earning power. A stronger earning power results in more of the population paying higher taxes and greater tax dollars contribute to a stronger society. College graduates also contribute to business and industry as well as education and technology. Additionally, a greater proportion of college graduates participate in society by voting in elections. In the 2008 presidential election, 78% of college graduates voted while only 56% of high school graduates voted (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). College graduates also tend to live healthier lifestyles. According to the College Board, 81% of

college graduates moderately or vigorously exercise at once a week while just 54% of high school graduates exercise regularly (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Whether it is widely known or not, society as a whole should have a vested interest in having more of its citizens become college graduates for they help promote a healthier community in which all members benefit in one way or another.

Colleges and universities are another major stakeholder in the quest to improve student persistence. In the 1970s, colleges began to study enrollment persistence patterns in earnest (Astin, 1993; Braxton, 2000; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Today, college leaders continue to seek ways to maximize the persistence of the students they enroll. In their 2010 Leadership Retention Study, Maguire Associates, Inc. polled over 800 college and university leaders in an on-line survey. Maguire Associates found that institutional leaders generally consider improving student retention and graduation rates "to be among the most pressing issues at their institution and believe their institution is genuinely committed to increasing persistence" (July, 2010). Attrition at higher education institutions causes lost income, creates less than desired stability within the campus community, and casts aspersion on colleges and universities in the public eye.

Student attrition is of even greater importance today as institutions face increasingly tighter budgets and increased competition for students. In an environment where the number of high school graduates and the college-going population among those graduates are declining (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008), and the variety of ways in which students shop for colleges is exploding, both competition among colleges for students and the cost to recruit them are increasing at a

fast pace. When students leave an institution, the college must either recruit students to replace those lost or forego the tuition income they contributed.

According to a Noel-Levitz Cost of Recruiting Report, private four-year colleges and universities spent an average of $2,143 in 2009 to enroll one new undergraduate student. Further, Noel-Levitz found that private colleges and universities were staff-intensive in the recruitment of students. On average one FTE staff person was needed for every 35 new students enrolled. In addition to salary and benefit resources, recruitment costs include many other indirect costs, including travel, publications, and marketing. Additionally, first-year students typically provide the lowest net revenue per student to the institution while fourth-year students provide the highest. This is due to the fact that institutions typically raise their tuition and fees each year while the portion of institutional grant or gift aid to students increases only slightly, if at all. Clearly, students who leave cost the college in terms of lost tuition and auxiliary revenue, additional recruitment revenue spent, as well as indirect costs when students and their parents have negative or damaging things to say about their experience at that college.

With the emergence and growth of enrollment management as a profession, colleges have hired staff and consultants whose sole focus is on student success and persistence. Countless student persistence webinars, seminars, conferences, consultants, websites, workshops and software packages are offered regularly across the nation. In response to the proliferation of suggestions on how to improve retention, colleges and universities have dedicated significant resources toward first-year experiences and programs in classrooms and in residence halls – all designed, at least in part, to improve

their retention and graduation rates. Colleges with sufficient demand in applications work hard to sculpt their incoming classes in order to build a cohort of students that best fits their institution in hopes of increasing persistence and graduation rates.

Additionally, colleges seek to build a sense of community and collegiality among their students, faculty and staff. Campuses with greater student turnover must work harder to maintain cohesiveness among members of their community, and a lack of sufficient cohesiveness is likely to negatively impact the campus climate and ultimately the retention of students. Perceived reputation is another reason that colleges seek greater retention and graduation rates. External constituencies (such as prospective students and parents, accrediting agencies, employers, donors, and media) use these rates as one measurement of college effectiveness. Student success rates are a significant indicator of how well a college or university fulfills its mission. *U.S. News and World Report*, while controversial in its ranking of colleges, uses both predicted and actual graduation rates as two of the components in its ranking system. Indeed, these rates carry a total weight of 27.5 to 32.5% of the total calculation of a college's ranking within groups of similar institutions (U.S. News, 2010). The variance between predicted and actual graduation rates counts for 7.5% in an effort to reward colleges that enroll – and graduate – at-risk students. Additionally, graduation and freshman retention rates count 20% for National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges and 25% for Regional Universities and Regional Colleges (College Board, 2010). The predicted graduation rate is calculated by a regression formula and is based primarily on the characteristics of the students who enroll while the actual rate is that which is reported by colleges and universities to

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The predicted graduation

rates reflect primarily the characteristics of the students who enroll while the actual

retention and graduation rates reflect both the characteristics of the students and their

experience on a given college or university campus.

State and national leaders also are focused on student persistence as a goal, and as

institutional accountability from all sectors escalates, retention and graduation rates are

increasingly seen as measurements of the quality of a postsecondary institution (Tinto,

1993). The College Board (2011) believes "an investment in education is an investment

in the future" and its singular goal is to "ensure that every student has the opportunity, to

prepare for, enroll in and graduate from college" (para. 1). In 2008, the College Board

created a Commission on Access, Admissions, and Success in Higher Education (Lee &

Rawls, 2010). The commission agreed that "… it is critical – and this should be a primary

goal – that 55% of the nation's young adults attain an associate's degree or higher by the

year 2025" and it offered a ten part action plan for achieving this goal (p. iii). Among the

recommendations is the charge to "dramatically increase college completion rates" (p. 2).

Graduation rates have taken center stage at the state level in higher education. In

2011, Indiana announced a $1 million grant for public institutions, aimed at increasing

graduation rates (Gillers, 2011).   Other states have followed similar paths and colleges

and universities are feeling the effects of greater accountability.

Improvement of student persistence and graduation rates is among national goals

as well. The Obama administration holds both access to and completion of higher

education as a national goal, as did the Bush administration (Swain, 2004). President

Obama's "First in the World" Competition calls for gains in both access to higher

education and in college completion rates, as reported by the U. S. Department of

Education (2012):

> To strengthen our Nation's competitiveness and to be first in the world in
> the proportion of college graduates, the Nation must open the doors of
> college to more Americans and make sure that students can complete their
> degrees.

Initiatives at the federal level are aimed at greater transparency in graduation rates

and greater effort and accountability to improve student persistence and graduation rates.

Recently, proposed legislation has called for states and colleges to establish quantifiable

goals for graduation rate improvements as a qualification for federal funding (Cook &

Pullaro, 2010). The 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act called for greater disclosure

of institutional graduation rates (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). According to the Organization

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED), the United States ranks lower

than desired in the number of postsecondary degrees among adults in developed countries

(Lee & Rawls, 2010). According to OCED, in 2007 the United States ranked fourth in

postsecondary degree attainment in the world among 55 to 64 year olds but ranked only

twelfth among 25 to 34 year olds (Lee & Rawls, 2010). This indicates that the generation

that is reaching retirement age will be replaced by a generation that is less well-educated

and potentially less able to produce leaders for society. Greater educational persistence

and attainment of younger generations in our country are of national concern if the

United States is to remain a world leader. Clearly, the education of each upcoming

generation is a priority for our society, for the world, and for our future. It is with good

reason that, as Tinto (1993) stated, retention has become one of the core metrics and most studied areas in higher education over the last 35 years.

While student success is ultimately defined in terms of graduation rates (typically in increments of four, five or six years from entry into college), postsecondary institutions pay particular attention to the persistence of students from the first-to-second year. Tinto (1993) suggests that the largest proportion of institutional leaving occurs in the first year and prior to the second and, therefore, the first year experience has become an area for special focus. Other researchers confirm Tinto's view that the vast majority of students who leave college do so before the beginning of their second year. According to Seidman (2005), measuring first-to-second year persistence is important. During this time, students are most vulnerable and institutions can intervene quickly and make an impact. In 2010, the American College Testing Service (ACT) reported a national, first-to-second year retention rate of 66.7% and a 46.2% average graduation rate for all types of institutions combined (ACT, 2010). Seidman (2005) puts this in a longer term perspective, showing that freshman-to-sophomore retention was slightly lower in 2001 than it was in 1983. During that same time period, Seidman reports a similar decline in average bachelor's degree graduation rates, from 57.5% in 1983 to 51.6% in 2003. The pattern is clear – the vast majority of students who leave college before graduating will do so before the beginning of their second year of college and a lower first-to-second year persistence rate is likely to result in a corresponding decline in the graduation rate. Conversely, stronger graduation rates can only be achieved if first-to-second year retention rates are strengthened. It is prudent, then, that higher education leaders focus on

first-to-second year retention rates because (a) this is the time period in which most attrition occurs and (b) it is more efficient to focus on a shorter time period, a time of critical transition for incoming students.

The higher education landscape is full of studies conducted by higher education researchers and practitioners who address the characteristics that are likely to affect student persistence and graduation rates. Some research focuses on the students themselves, studying specific college student populations (Morris, Beck, & Mattis, 2007; Vander Schee, 2008), or on characteristics that students bring with them to college (Adelman, 2000; DeBerard, Speilman, & Julke, 2004; Fike & Fike, 2008; McGrath & Braunstein, 1997). Other researchers focus on the institution's role, measuring the impact of the college environment and programs (Blaney, 2009; Boyer, Brookfield, Tobias, Hartel, Smith, & Rendon, 1992; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Himmel, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuch, Whitt, & Assoc., 2005; Laird, Chen & Kuh, 2008; Lau, 2003; Veal & Neal, 1980) or on optimal methods of studying retention (Caison, 2007; Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009; Yu, DiGangi, Jannasch-Pennell, Werjiuo, & Kapolet, 2007). Oseuera and Rhee (2008) suggest a categorization of the research in which one group of studies focuses on persistence from the individual student's perspective while another group studies retention from an institutional or organizational perspective.

Alexander Astin's (1993) extensive experience in the area of assessment of outcomes in higher education offers a platform for studying student persistence among colleges and universities. In his view, assessment involves the gathering of information to be measured and the utilization of that information for the improvement of an

individual and/or an organization. For this study, the focus is on the utilization of data in order to improve postsecondary institutions and the experience of the students they serve. Astin offers a tool known as the inputs-environment-outputs (I-E-O) model as a conceptual guide for improvement in higher education institutions. Colleges and and universities are best served by broadening their focus from the impact of inputs (student characteristics) on outputs to further assess the impact of the environment on outcomes. Simply stated, paying attention to the characteristics of students who enroll at a college will impact persistence and college graduation rates, but those rates can be enhanced (or diminished) by the impact of the environment. This study will apply Astin's I-E-O model to explore the impact of the environment on first-to-second year retention in a case study methodology on three Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) college campuses.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to better understand the factors that help colleges achieve higher than predicted first-to-second year retention rates that cannot be explained by the quality of their incoming classes. More specifically this study seeks to identify the institutional *environmental* characteristics that are present on campuses with higher than expected first-to-second year retention rates. With growing interest and attention – from within and outside the academy – on student persistence, it is helpful to understand why some colleges meet and exceed their predicted first-to-second year retention rates while other colleges fall short of their predicted first-to-second year persistence rates. Retention rates reflect in large part the characteristics of the students enrolled on a

campus, but they are further impacted, either positively or negatively, by characteristics of the college environment. A better understanding of the impact of the environment may help more colleges achieve the retention rates they desire and take into account the students they enroll.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is affiliated with 26 independent liberal arts colleges (see Appendix A), ranging in size (500 to 3000 students) and location (from the Pacific Northwest to the Southeastern United States). The ELCA colleges provide a sample of private higher education institutions worthy of study because they are similar in mission, yet each campus offers varying higher education settings and opportunities for students. While affiliated with the ELCA, each college is self-governed by its own board of trustees, thus giving each college its unique characteristics. The national headquarters for ELCA, located in Chicago, Illinois, has been collecting, assembling, and sharing data from virtually every administrative division on each campus since the late 1960s. Among these institutions are several colleges that consistently and significantly outperform expected first-to-second year retention and graduation rates.

Many retention theorists have examined student characteristics to identify those that best predict student success and retention in college and general agreement exists that academic performance in high school is one of the most valuable predictors of success in college. Seidman (2005) cites academic selectivity of a college also as a critical factor in student persistence. According to Seidman, more selective institutions tend to have higher freshman-to-sophomore persistence rates than do colleges that are less selective. In 2001, for example, highly selective colleges had a 91.6% aggregate

first-to-second year retention rate; traditional selective institutions saw a 72.4% aggregate

first-to-second year rate; and, open enrollment institutions had the weakest first-to-second

year retention rate at 60.6%. Typically, institutions that are more selective enroll students

with higher high school academic profiles. DeBerard, Speilmans and Julke (2004) found

that low retention is modestly related to low freshman year academic achievement and

low high school GPA. In his 1997 study of expected versus actual retention and

graduation rates, Astin (1997) used four variables that accounted for most of the variance

in first-to-second year persistence that can be predicted for entering student

characteristics: high school grades, standardized test scores, gender, and race, with the

greatest predictive variable being high school grades. In their quest to identify

meaningful predictors of student persistence, McGrath and Braunstein (1997) found high

school grade point average, combined SAT scores, first semester grade point average and

financial variables to be significant predictors of retention. Laird, Chen and Kuh (2008)

studied the impact of college characteristics and student engagement on predicted

retention rates and acknowledged that the best predictors of graduation are academic

preparation and motivation.

The *ELCA College Trends Analysis Report* (2010) provides aggregate annual data

for several characteristics of incoming students to all ELCA colleges and universities.

While high school grade point average is not reported, the percent of students in the top

ten percent of their high school class is used as a measurement of academic ability of

incoming students. Scattergrams are used to illustrate the performance of each ELCA

college each year between 1999 and 2008, where the percent of students in the top 10% is

on the x-axis, actual first-to-second year retention is on the y-axis, and the expected first-to-second year retention rates are on the trend line (see Appendix M). The colleges on the trend line perform as predicted in terms of first-to-second year retention rates while colleges below the trend line fall short of the retention that would be expected given the quality of their incoming students. The group above the trend line identifies those colleges that outperform the expectations. In other words, according to Astin's I-E-O theory, there is likely something in the environments on those campuses that causes their actual first-to-second year retention rates to be better than their predicted retention rates. Appendix N presents a ten-year summary of all ELCA colleges that fall above the trend line. Ten institutions, namely Colleges A, C, D, F, G, H, I, J, N, and R, outperformed expectations for at least half of the years shown. Three institutions that have *outperformed* significantly and consistently are the focus of this study.

The above findings are supported by *U.S. News and World Report* methodology. *U.S. News* annually uses IPEDS data as part of its college rankings. Among the variables studied, *U.S. News* calculates a predicted six-year retention rate for colleges and compares that predicted value to the college-reported achieved value. The predicted value is calculated by using a stepwise regression that includes the following variables: standardized test scores, expenditures per student, proportion of the entering class in the top 25% of their high school class, and whether the school is public or private. The greatest weight of all the variables (.241) is placed on rank in class (R. Morse, personal communication, October 26, 2009). The greater the achieved graduation rate is over the predicted rate, the greater the score for that college. *U.S. News* findings support the

selection of the three colleges identified in the ELCA analysis of predicted versus achieved first-to-second year retention rate based on the percent of the class in the top ten percent of the high school graduation class.

This ELCA database provides an opportunity for study of those ELCA colleges that consistently outperform predicted first-to-second year retention and graduation rates. Aggregate institutional data from virtually every area of the campus are found in the database (see Appendix D). An interview-based qualitative study of leaders and students at those colleges will serve as a way to explore the variables that are consistent with their retention rates. This study seeks to further the research on first-to-second year retention by identifying environmental factors important to a sample of independent ELCA church-related colleges.

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. At three ELCA institutions, what specific programs, policies, and/or activities do faculty and administrators believe may contribute to higher than predicted first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates and to attrition among first-year students?

2. At three ELCA institutions, what programs, policies, and/or activities do second-year students believe may contribute to first-to-second year student persistence and to attrition among undergraduate, first-year students?

3. What practices, policies, and/or programs do selected ELCA institutions appear to share in common that may contribute to higher levels of first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates?

Definition of Terms

It is important to have a clear understanding of key terms related to student persistence, which are used in this study. Nine definitions are provided below.

Attrition: Attrition is a term used by postsecondary institutions to denote those students who do not return to the original institution at some point after enrolling. The attrition percentage is calculated by dividing the number of students from the original cohort who do not re-enroll by the number of students in the original cohort.

Cohort: A cohort refers to a group of students who enroll in a postsecondary institution at the same time and who have similar goals. For example, this study refers to a cohort of first-time, full-time students who enroll in a given institution in a particular fall term with the goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Regardless of credits earned (and the resulting classification of freshman, sophomore, junior or senior), they remain a static cohort.

Dropout: Dropout refers to a student who begins to work on a degree and then stops before attaining a degree from the original institution.

Graduation Rate: Graduation rate refers to the percentage of students from a particular cohort who graduate at a given point in time from the original institution. Graduation rates are typically calculated in four-, five- and six-year terms. The graduation rate is calculated by dividing the number of students from the original cohort who earn a degree by the number of students in the original cohort.

Inputs: Inputs refer to characteristics of students in a given cohort. Examples of inputs include academic achievement in high school, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic

status, and student expectations and aspirations.

Outputs: Outputs refer to the combined impact of the inputs and the environment. In this study, output generally refers to first-to-second year retention rates.

Predicted Retention: Predicted retention refers to the percent of first-year students that is expected to return for their second year based on academic achievement in high school.

Persistence: Persistence refers to the student's behavior, as in, "the student persisted from the first year to the second year."

Retention: Retention refers to "the ability of a particular college or university to successfully graduate [or re-enroll] the students that initially enroll at that institution" (Seidman, 2005, p. 3). Typically, retention statistics focus on year-to-year persistence, though they can refer to semester-to-semester persistence.

This study will focus on first-to-second year retention. Retention is calculated by dividing the number of students from the original cohort who re-enroll by the number of students in the original cohort.

Significance of the Study

Despite years of research on student persistence in college, graduation rates have not increased. The significance of this study is that it will contribute to student persistence research intended to inform colleges and universities about factors that may help them achieve stronger retention and graduation rates.

This study may be significant for several constituencies. Colleges and universities are the most likely to benefit from knowing the environmental factors that

help their students persist toward graduation at higher rates. As colleges and universities more consistently help students achieve their goal of college graduation, parents and students also will benefit. Students who attain their college degrees in a more timely fashion (four to five years) are likely to pay less for their degrees and will be able to enter the workforce earlier and start earning an income commensurate with their postsecondary education. Even alumni may benefit as higher retention and graduation rates contribute to a higher perceived reputation of colleges and universities.

This study seeks to help postsecondary institutions be more successful in achieving the retention and graduation rates to which they, and their constituencies, aspire. Knowing the environmental factors that enhance student persistence may lead college officials to manage campus strategies and resources differently. Recruiting students to replace those who leave is costly for institutions, both in terms of time and money. To the degree that new or enhanced programs, facilities and opportunities for engagement enhance student persistence, colleges may recruit fewer new students, enabling them to reinvest some recruitment costs back to the improvement of the student experience. This is a highly desirable cycle for colleges, as a stronger experience leads to greater demand among prospective students and greater retention for those who enroll.

The results of this study may aid students and parents in the college selection process. Greater awareness of factors that enhance student success may lead them to select colleges with which they have the greatest fit. A stronger fit will lead to a greater chance of college graduation.

In order to more fully understand retention of students, colleges and universities typically look to institutions with similar missions and environments. Persistence is a complex phenomenon, but identifying best practices and factors that contribute to improved retention may pave the way for colleges to improve retention rates on their campuses.

This study also has significance for future research and institutional policies. This study seeks to examine a limited number and type of institutions. Future studies may use a similar methodology to explore varying types of college settings. Additionally, environmental factors identified in this exploratory study may be the basis for future qualitative and/or quantitative studies.

Delimitations

As with all studies, the present study will have initial limitations. This study focuses on a small group of private liberal arts colleges that are affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). While similar in mission, each institution is governed by an independent board and decisions on one campus do not directly affect another ELCA campus. The colleges differ in size and are located in diverse settings, from small and rural campuses to medium-size and urban campuses. Some are strictly undergraduate while others offer master's degrees and beyond.

Case studies present unique challenges. By nature, case studies explore settings that are complex. Specifically, the environment on any given college or university campus is made up of many contributing and interrelated variables, and college environments tend to change over time as students, faculty and staff come and go.

Isolating environmental variables that appear to make a difference will be a challenge.

In spite of these delimitations, the study is worthwhile because it advances knowledge about the importance of environmental factors on student persistence. Most retention studies focus on the student or on programs that are successful. This study seeks to provide a resource for colleges and how they might best direct their assets in an effort to improve persistence rates for students.

Overview and Organization of the Study

The present study is organized around five chapters. Chapter I introduced the topic of the study and raised the research questions. Chapter II reviews relevant literature to provide a broader framework for this study. Chapter III explains the methodology for the study. Chapter IV presents the results of the study, and Chapter V provides conclusions, discussion, and the implications the findings have for institutional policy, as well as for future study.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Each year, thousands of students across the country enroll in colleges full of hopes for the next four years. They want it all – academic growth and social interaction, as well as opportunities that will help them grow personally, financially and even spiritually. Yet over 40% of those students will not return for a second year at the college they entered (Lee & Rawls, 2010). In an environment of soaring college costs, questions abound about accountability and efficiency in higher education. Institutions question and examine what happens between the time a student selects and enrolls in college and the time he or she leaves that setting, possibly before earning a college degree. The purpose of this study is to explore potential relationships between environmental factors on college campuses whose actual first-to-second year retention rates are consistently and significantly stronger than their predicted retention rates. This chapter reviews the relevant literature in order to better understand factors that are important in student persistence in college.

Nearly a half century of data on student persistence and retention exists, and reviewing all the available literature would be an insurmountable task. Yin's (2011) suggestion that an appropriate review of the literature is *selective* rather than *comprehensive* (p. 62) is most appropriate for this study. In his view, "the main purpose of a selective review is to sharpen a researcher's considerations regarding topic of study,

method, and data source" (p. 62). This chapter is organized into four sections. The first

section reviews literature that offers a systematic way of studying student persistence.

This section will focus primarily on Astin's I-E-O model (1993), as it serves as the

conceptual framework for this study. The second section reviews studies that focus on

student characteristics, or inputs, and their predictive power and impact on student

persistence. The third section considers studies that focus on environmental factors

linked to student persistence. This section will provide insight into categories of

environmental factors such as academic, physical, social, and other environmental factors

that have been noted in student persistence studies. Finally, the last section deals with

gaps in the research and describes how this study will further the understanding of

student persistence in college.

Many possible outcomes can be considered using Astin's model, such as

graduation rates, end of first-year college grade point average, and first-to-second year

retention rates. My study, similar to many others (Murtaugh et al, 1999; Seidman, 2005;

Tinto, 1993; Umfress, 2010) focuses solely on first-to-second year student retention.

Tinto (1993) was among the earliest researchers to note the importance of first-to-second

year retention, stating,

> We [study departure of first-year students] because the first year proves…
> to be an especially important year in the process of persistence. The
> character of one's experience in that year does much to shape subsequent
> persistence. By the same token, the largest proportion of institutional
> leaving occurs in that year and prior to the beginning of the second year.
> For this reason alone … the first year has become a special object of
> institutional policy aimed at reducing student attrition. (p. 14)

As noted in research conducted by Murtaugh et al. (1999), "withdrawals (over time) tend to occur at pulses at the end of each school year, with an especially precipitous decline at the end of the students' first spring quarter" (p. 361). Although they caution against focusing retention efforts solely on first and second year students, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) found that "…most students (who leave) do so early in their academic careers…" (p. 33). Seidman (2005) also illustrated the significance of freshman-to-sophomore persistence rates, noting its importance as a "measurement… both because of student vulnerability at the beginning of college and because institutions can react quickly with interventions" (p. 37).

Astin's Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) Model

On a national level, over 40% of those who enter higher education never attain a bachelor's degree (College Board, 2010). Colleges deviate from this average for a variety of reasons. Of paramount importance to these variances are the unique student experiences (both prior to and during college), the expectations and characteristics of students, as well as the unique environment provided by each institution. Alexander Astin (1993) frames it simply: the factors that cause a college to be more or less successful in having its students graduate can be categorized as inputs (student characteristics) and environmental factors (mainly institutional characteristics). These characteristics then combine to produce an output, in this case retention and graduation (Astin, 1993). In his Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) model, Astin suggests that inputs alone can be used to predict the output, but the impact of the environment can change the predicted output, either positively or negatively. Astin compares this model to

his work in developmental psychology in this way: "People come to you for help in a certain condition, and you strive to work with them in such a way as to improve their condition. The success of the treatment you provide is thus judged in terms of how much the patient or client is able to improve" (p. 16). Applied to the higher education environment, this model seeks to help the college or university "… enhance the educational and personal development of its students and faculty" (p. 21).

The value of this model is that it provides a framework that moves beyond assessing institutions based simply on the strength of their first-to-second year retention rates alone. It allows an institution to assess how well it helps students persist while taking into consideration the type of students who enroll on its campus. Put another way, colleges should examine their student retention rates compared to their *own* expected retention rates rather than simply comparing their rates to those of other institutions. In doing so, a less selective college (College "A") whose students persist above the expectation, given the characteristics of students it enrolls, may be serving its students more successfully than a more selective institution (College "B") whose actual student persistence rates are at or below the expectation, given its higher student academic profile. Using Astin's model, the campus environment on College "A" is such that it enhances student persistence beyond expectations. Such an achievement would be desirable on any college campus.

In Astin's (1993) earliest use of the I-E-O model and his work with Ph.D. productivity (p. 17), Astin reconsidered the earlier observation by Knapp and Goodrich (1952) and Knapp and Greenbaum (1953), that certain colleges were much more likely

than others to produce students who went on to earn Ph.D. degrees. The earlier

researchers had observed that successful colleges tended to have larger libraries, smaller

student-faculty ratios, and more faculty members holding a Ph.D., leading them to the

conclusion that the characteristics of the college environment produced these results

(Astin, 1993). However, Astin and Holland (1961) additionally observed that these

colleges were also among those that attracted large numbers of National

Merit Scholars so they asked whether the results could be a factor related to the input

(enrolling a greater number of high achieving students) rather than the impact of the

environment. In 1962, Astin found that when the characteristics of the students were

taken into account, some previously defined successful colleges were actually under

producing Ph.D. degree recipients while other institutions with lower numbers of Ph.D.

degrees were in fact producing more Ph.D. recipients than was expected.

This work led Astin (1993) to conclude that outputs, regardless of how they are

defined, must always be evaluated in terms of inputs, that output is typically better

predicted based on multiple input variables rather than a single input variable; and that

input and output data by themselves are inadequate. The combined impact of the inputs

and of the environment is necessary for a full understanding of the outcomes. Astin

offers the following diagram to illustrate his theory.
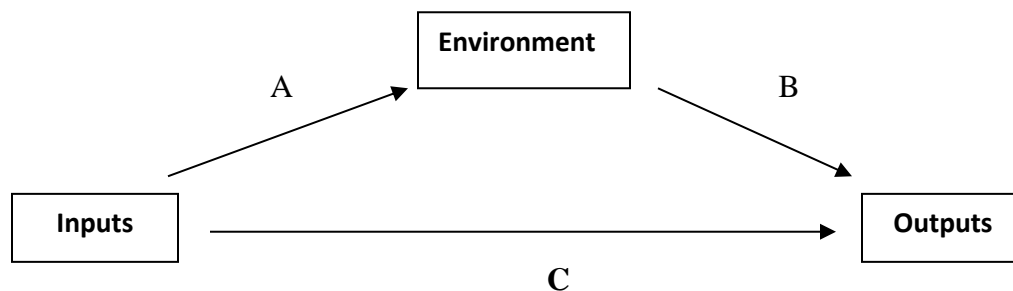
Note. From A. Astin (1993), *Assessment for excellence*, p. 18. Copyright 1993 by
The American Council on Education and The Oryx Press.

Figure 1. I-E-O Model by A. Astin

      The three arrows show the relationships between the three sets of variables and

strive to show that change (hopefully improvement) happens as the inputs move through

the environment and become outputs. Assessment and evaluation in education are

primarily focused on relationship B, the effects of environment on outcomes (Astin,

1993, p. 19). Inputs can also be related directly to outputs as shown in relationship C (the

predictive relationship), and relationship A is likely to indicate that certain types of

students are drawn to and subsequently help to shape certain kinds of educational

environments. The basic purpose of the I-E-O model is to allow a campus to make

adjustments in the environment that will affect student outcomes in some way (Astin,

1993). Put another way, colleges exist for the purpose of admitting students (inputs) and,

through a unique environmental experience, add value to produce desired outcomes or

graduates. When students leave prior to the desired outcome of graduation, institutions

explore variables that account for lack of success and how the input variables and/or the

environment can be adjusted in order to maximize success. In this study, the focus will

be on relationship B, those characteristics of the environment that contribute to a greater

than predicted output, namely first-to-second year retention of students.

Astin (1993) created the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at

UCLA in 1966 "specifically to collect input data that would make it possible to apply the

I-E-O model to a national study of student outcomes in higher education" (p. 64). As a

result, he has worked with data from millions of students over many years and has

created a framework which an institution can use to calculate its expected retention rate

based on the characteristics of its incoming students and to measure the impact of the

environment on that expectation. The institution then compares its expected rate against

its actual retention rate. For most institutions, the expected and actual retention rates

correspond reasonably well. For some, however, the two rates differ substantially,

indicating that they are doing something that causes their actual retention rate to deviate

from their expected rate. By using a stepwise regression process, colleges can identify

those variables that best relate to a known outcome. Thus, Astin's model is useful in that

it takes into account all possible variables: *input* variables, the *environment*, and *output*

variables. This study seeks to employ Astin's I-E-O model in order to understand why

expected first-to-second year retention rates of some colleges among the 26 Evangelical

Lutheran Church in American (ELCA) colleges consistently perform above their

expected rates.

Surprisingly few studies cite Astin's I-E-O model specifically. Leonard Kelly

(1996) implemented Astin's I-E-O model to examine student persistence at the United

States Coast Guard Academy (CT). He studied 619 incoming cadets in the classes of

1991 and 1993, all of whom had similar profiles or, to use Astin's term, inputs. His research focused on three primary areas: (1) the relationship between input variables and persistence outcomes, (2) the relationship between measures of academic and social involvement and persistence outcomes, and (3) the relationship between input variables and measures of academic and social involvement (p. 5). Kelly's study confirmed the efficacy of Astin's model and found that academic and social integration had an impact on student persistence, particularly when that integration happened early in a student's college career. Although Kelly's study highlights the ability to conduct an institution-specific investigation by using Astin's I-E-O model, the uniqueness of the military academy makes generalization of the findings difficult. Studies using Astin's model to examine student persistence on multiple campuses is desirable as an aid to help colleges design programs and policies with the greatest possible impact on student persistence.

In her research, Castro (2006) applied Astin's I-E-O model as a foundation for studying the retention and graduation patterns of medical laboratory technician and clinical laboratory technician (MLT/CLT) students. Using a 55 question survey instrument that was sent to a sample of program directors of MLT/CLT students, Castro identified input, environmental and outcome variables related to MLT/CLT students. Among the variables that Castro found to be influential in the success of MLT/CLT students were: program size, English-speaking ability, enrollment status, course sequence, and faculty-student ratio. Generally, students who were full-time, native English speakers enrolled in smaller programs were more likely to stay enrolled, pass the certification examination, and gain employment. Her findings, while helpful to those in

specialized medical technician programs, are difficult to generalize to other types of education, such as liberal arts programs, and her study does not address predicted versus actual retention and graduation patterns. The ability to compare expected and actual student success patterns is powerful and could in Castro's study, for example, illustrate how MLT/CLT programs might be designed so that those enrolling greater numbers of non-native English speaking students would be more successful than expected.

Other research that applied the I-E-O model includes studies done by Astin (1997) and Murtaugh, Burns, and Schuster (1999). Their research compared predicted-to-actual persistence rates. In their 1999 study, Murtaugh et al. examined the use and advantages of survival analysis with retention data and identified factors associated with student persistence at Oregon State University. Specifically, attrition rises with student age at time of first enrollment and with decreasing high school grade point average as well as with decreasing first-quarter college grade point average. Additionally, in-state students persist at higher rates than out-of-state students and enrollment in a freshman orientation course is linked with higher retention (p. 355). Based on these findings, Oregon State has several options for increasing its student retention rates. The university could change the inputs, for example, by reducing the number of students enrolled who are older than traditional college age. They could also change the environment, for example, by providing programs and policies targeted to the at-risk (older) students to help them be more successful in college. Oregon State used this study to successfully enhance the environment by paying particular attention to out-of-state students and ethnic minority students during orientation, resulting in higher than expected retention for those groups.

In order to fully explore retention within Astin's I-E-O model, it is helpful to present the literature that grounds my study in two groups. First, studies focusing on students and the characteristics they bring with them to college (such as gender, academic preparation, first- generation college status, and ethnicity) and their relationship to persistence will be reviewed. This section also will address studies that identify the predictive power of student (input) characteristics. These variables are controllable to some degree by selective postsecondary institutions in that they control which students are admitted to the institution and which are not. Colleges with greater demand, manifested in a healthy applicant pool, can select students based on characteristics most desirable to the institution and most likely to result in higher persistence rates. While great variance exists with respect to acceptance rates at ELCA colleges and universities, most are not able to sculpt their incoming classes to such a degree as to strongly and positively impact retention rates. Among the ELCA colleges in 2009, the mean admit rate was 66% while the range was from 40% to 95% acceptance rates (*The ELCA Colleges and Universities Trend Analysis Report*, 2010). Still, "retention is a campus-based phenomenon" (Seidman, 2005, p. 3) and each college has a unique expected rate of retention given the characteristics of its incoming class as well as a unique actual retention rate given the impact of the environment offered on the campus.

Outputs are the end (or desired) result in Astin's (1993) model. Outputs, according to Astin, are those results that are produced by the combination of the input and environmental variables. Higher education seeks countless different kinds of outcomes such as earned grade point average, retention and graduation rates, student

overall satisfaction with the college experience, percent of graduates who earn higher degrees and percent of graduates gainfully employed upon graduation. This study focuses on outcomes in terms of student persistence rates from the first-to-second years of college.

Because student persistence is influenced by the characteristics of the students attracted to a particular campus as well as the experience they encounter once enrolled, it is important to explore all types of variables known to influence student persistence (Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). While the focus in my study is on the impact of campus-specific environmental variables, it is important to understand how input variables, or the characteristics of the students themselves, impact their persistence in college. The next section will highlight studies pertaining to student (input) characteristics and their impact on student persistence.

Student Characteristics (or Inputs) and Prediction of Student Persistence

Input variables include entering student characteristics that can be classified as demographic (such as gender, ethnicity, parental academic level achieved, and socioeconomic factors), academic (such as high school grade point average, national test scores, and class rank), or in terms of student expectations and aspirations (Astin, 1993). Numerous studies cite input variables that can be used to predict the outcomes of student performance and retention (Abramson, 2009; Astin, 1997; Cambiano, Denny, & DeVore, 2000; Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Dey & Astin, 1993; Fike & Fike, 2008; Guarino & Hocevar, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005; McGrath, & Braunstein, 1997; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Summers, 2003; Sun, Lie, &

Lacost, 2004; Yu, DiGangi, Jannasch-Pennell, Lo, & Kaprolet, 2007).

Academic (Input) Variables

Predicting student persistence in college, while possible, is complex. Myriad studies have resulted in the identification of input variables found to be significant in predicting student persistence. The strongest single input variable known to predict college student persistence is academic performance (GPA) in college (Astin, 1993; DeBerard, Speilmans, & Julka, 2004; Sun, Lie, & Lacost, 2004). However, among variables known prior to enrollment in college, general consensus has existed for years that academic achievement in high school is the single best predictor of student persistence in college (Astin, 1997; Cope, 1978; DeBerard, Speilmans, & Julka, 2004; Herreid & Miller, 2009). In 1978, Cope was among the earliest researchers to find that among the best measurements of retention was the student's own ability, as measured by high school grade point average and scholastic aptitude tests, with greater emphasis on grade point average. In their study examining potential predictors of freshman academic achievement and retention, DeBerard, Speilmans, and Julka (2004) found high correlations between ten variables and cumulative first year GPA and one variable that was correlated with retention. They concluded that, generally, more selective colleges can expect higher student achievement and retention. McGrath and Braunstein (1997) sought to identify the predictors of attrition among freshmen who voluntarily withdrew by studying the relationship between attrition and certain demographic, academic, financial, and social factors (para. 4). In their qualitative study, 632 full-time freshmen who entered college in fall 1994 were invited to participate. The College Student Inventory

(CSI) (College Board, 2011) was administered to the 56% of the students who volunteered. The group was tracked into the sophomore year in order to ascertain who persisted and who did not. The researchers found that many variables were not significant predictors of student retention. Variables that were not found to be significant included demographic variables (age, gender, race and ethnicity), marital status, parents' educational backgrounds, family native language, distance from home to college, participation in the residential life program, high school program of study, size of high school graduating class, highest degree to be pursued, participation in college work study program, coping skills, and receptivity to support services. The analysis found several variables that were significant predictors of success. Among them are high school grade point average, SAT scores, first semester college grade point averages, socioeconomic background and participation in the financial aid program. First semester college grade point average was found to be the strongest predictor of student persistence, followed by student impressions of peer students and high school grade point average. The best predictor of first semester grade point average is high school academic performance. Their study revealed, therefore, that high school academic performance is the strongest input variable in predicting student persistence. Importantly, McGrath and Braunstein recommend that college and university administrators conduct their own research regarding student persistence, as the causes of attrition vary and retention strategies produce varying results on different campuses. This argument confirms the need to compare an institution's persistence rate against its unique predicted retention rate rather than against persistence rates of other institutions.

Another way to consider student achievement is to study institutional selectivity. Colleges with sufficiently high student demand will have larger applicant pools and can therefore select a greater number of higher achieving students. Institutional selectivity has been found to be a positive indicator of student persistence in college (Tinto, 1993; Umfress, 2010). In his study of the relationship of variables on student persistence, Umfress found that institutional selectivity was the leading predictor of student success, followed by the amount of money spent on student affairs/services and whether an institution was private or public. Regarding selectivity, moderately selective institutions had greater retention than less selective institutions and very selective institutions had stronger retention than both moderately and less selective institutions.

Umfress's (2010) research confirms Tinto's (1993) earlier assertion that institutional selectivity plays a major role in student retention from first-to-second year and in degree completion. Using 1990 entering student data from the American College Testing (ACT) Program, Tinto reported that first-to-second year attrition for highly selective (SAT > 1100) colleges is about eight percent while attrition for traditional admission (SAT 801-930) colleges is approximately 26.4% and that institutions with open admissions (SAT < 700) have approximately 45.5% attrition (p. 16). Similar patterns were found when examining degree completion rates (p. 20). These data indicate the existence of a direct relationship between selectivity and student retention rates in which institutions with high selectivity should expect higher retention rates and institutions with low selectivity should expect low retention rates. Other studies affirm this relationship. In their 1980 monograph on behalf of the American College Testing

Service (ACT), Beal and Noel (1980) suggested that academic preparation in high school plays a major role in persistence toward graduation and that colleges able to attract more students with stronger academic preparation typically report higher student retention rates.

In the 2004 replication of the ACT survey by Habley and McClanahan (2004), respondents from four-year private colleges identified inadequate preparation for college level work among the top six factors that made a moderate or higher contribution to student attrition. The other factors are inadequate financial resources, lack of motivation to succeed, poor study skills, inadequate personal coping skills, and lack of educational goals and aspirations (p. 5). Clearly, the ability to sculpt a class of students with input characteristics that include strong academic preparation in high school is an important strategy for improving student persistence. However, the application of Astin's I-E-O model to the ACT survey raises important questions about the design of the survey. In their study, Habley and McClanahan (2004) defined high performing four-year private colleges as those campuses performing in the top quartile in both year-to-year retention and degree completion rates and low-performing campuses as those performing in the bottom quartile in both year-to-year retention and degree completion rates (p. 15). The study proceeded to identify programs in those college environments that impacted (or failed to impact) persistence rates. However, in Astin's model, the researchers' method of categorization accounted for the outputs and the impact of the environment on outputs, but failed to consider the inputs, or the characteristics of the students who enrolled on their campuses. An alternative way to conduct the study would be to define top

performers as those institutions whose actual retention and graduation rates are stronger

than their predicted rates and bottom performers as those institutions whose actual

retention and graduation rates are weaker than their predicted rates and then to assess

common and differing environmental factors present on those campuses.

Before reviewing literature that highlights the impact of environmental, or campus

characteristics, on the desired outcome of retention, it is important to identify more

broadly, additional student characteristics that matter in student persistence. In the next

section, non-academic student characteristics will be presented.

Non-academic Student Input Variables and Persistence

Non-academic student characteristics also play a role in predicting student

persistence. In 1978, Cope was among the first researchers to conclude that ability alone

cannot predict success. He introduced attitude and commitment to goals as important

elements. In 1985, Noel, Levitz and Associates reported a number of internal and

external forces that inhibit students from reaching their goal of graduation. Internal

forces include procrastination, loneliness, the inability to assert needs and seek help, self-

doubt, fear of failure, fear of success, fear of rejection, value conflicts, career indecision,

and boredom (p. 49). More recently, in her study of first-year college students at a small

private residential campus, Jodi Koslow Martin (2010) found that students with realistic

expectations that are aligned with faculty expectations is an important factor in the

success of first-year students. Her study focused on academic, social, and career

expectations and found that greater collaboration between high schools and colleges in

setting those expectations is likely to result in greater student success. The challenge in

using many non-academic student characteristics in admission decisions or retention strategies is that such attributes are more difficult to attain than are test scores and high school academic performance.

In their study to identify students at risk of attrition or low academic performance at four-year colleges and universities, Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004) highlighted the need for institutions to evaluate retention models so that they incorporate both academic and non- academic variables. (Interestingly, their study refers to "retention" in a general sense rather than focusing on graduation rates or year-to-year retention rates.) In their meta-analysis approach, they reviewed over 400 studies, of which 109 became the focus of their study. In addition to identifying which non-academic factors had the greatest impact on student persistence in college, they also distinguished variables important to academic performance from variables important to student persistence, noting that when these factors were combined, the overall impact on student retention and performance was greater. The overall relationship to college retention was strongest when socioeconomic status (including parents' educational attainment and family income), high school grade point average, and ACT scores were combined with institutional commitment, academic goals, social support, academic self-confidence, and social environment (p. vii). Of these variables, socioeconomic status, high school grade point average, ACT scores academic goals, and academic self-confidence would be considered input variables because students bring these characteristics with them to college as opposed to the college environment providing these elements. While identifying non-academic variables important in student retention, Lowkowski et al.

(2004) also confirm that variables most consistent with higher student retention are institutional selectivity and those student characteristics that define academic success in high school, namely high school grade point average and ACT scores.

Similarly, in their study of college student persistence, Milem and Berger (1987) identified relationships between student (input) characteristics and environmental factors found to be consistent with student persistence in college. According to their model, students enter the college environment with specific "entry characteristics" (p. 3). For example, some students have stronger levels of institutional commitment than others. Those early levels of commitment lead to varying degrees of involvement upon entry to college. The varying degrees of involvement (or interaction with the environment) affect subsequent involvement on campus during the first year and, ultimately, the level of involvement affects institutional commitment and student persistence decisions (p. 3). In this case, while the level of involvement or interaction with the environment (an environmental variable) is important to first-to-second year persistence, the input of student commitment to the institution (an input variable) is key to involvement. Put another way, Glenn (2010) states simply, student attitude matters. Thus, Glenn supports Milem and Berger's (1987) and Koslow Martin's (2010) suggestion that student characteristics beyond academic achievement in high school are instrumental in student persistence in college. Unfortunately, a student's level of institutional commitment and expectations are more difficult to obtain than are academic achievement indicators and thus are more difficult to use in defining student-institutional fit that is important in student persistence.

The impact of gender on student persistence has been studied with mixed results. In 1978 Cope reported that the gender of the student appeared somewhat related to retention, with most research reporting that men persist toward graduation at a higher rate. More recent research has been inconclusive in terms of gender as a factor in predicting college success. In his 2007 study, Robert Johnson found gender and first semester grades to be most effective in predicting retention, with female students predicting higher persistence than males. In their analysis, Murtaugh et al. (1999) found gender not to be associated significantly with retention. Few studies have found gender to be among the critical factors in student persistence.

The literature on student persistence in college is vast and points to the complexity of variables that affect, or are consistent with, stronger persistence rates of students. While many student characteristic variables have been studied, few input variables appear to have a consistent and significant impact on predicting student persistence from first-to-second year, with the exception of academic performance in high school. However, student academic performance in high school does not fully explain why students on some campuses persist at higher rates than students on other campuses, suggesting that other variables must be considered. The impact of the environment, in terms of campus programs and policies, can change the expected retention of students. The next section highlights research that explores the impact of the environment (or, relationship B, Figure 1) on student retention.

Environmental Factors Influencing Student Persistence

According to Astin (1993), the "environment refers to the student's actual experience during the educational program" (p. 18). Environmental variables are, for the most part, those over which the institution has direct control in order to develop the student's talents. For the purposes of this study, the environment will include programs and policies in and out of the classroom that may impact the student's persistence in college.

Some researchers do not view the role of academic preparation as the key factor in student persistence, asserting that academic preparation is only a piece of the puzzle (Davidson, Hall, & Milligan, 2009; Martin, 1985). They suggest that many schools have focused too much on admission and recruitment programs as a means to increase retention and they feel that more emphasis should be placed on institution-wide programs to reduce attrition. Both input and environmental factors are important. The strongest understanding of student persistence comes from the combined effects of the students who enroll and the college experience they find. The next area of literature to be presented focuses on studies of environmental characteristics found on various college campuses. These studies are numerous and focus on variables such as first- year programs, advising and mentoring programs, facilities, financial aid and student services across campus. It is interesting to note that while the input variables are largely student characteristics, the environmental variables are almost entirely composed of institutional variables that can be more easily controlled by the institution.

Environmental variables are the most complex to study as many impact the student experience and are often difficult to isolate. Environmental characteristics encompass all those variables present in the college setting that are likely to impact a student's experience while in college. Classifications may include academic program and policy variables (such as advising and selection of a major, first-year seminars, bridge programs, faculty expectations and relationships with students, and peer mentoring), social programs and policies (such as participation in clubs, organizations, work, volunteerism), housing programs and policies (such as roommate compatibility and commuter versus on-campus residency), and physical environment (such as location of the campus, variety and condition of buildings on campus including academic spaces and student spaces such as housing). For a college whose actual retention rate differs from its expected retention rate, something in the college's unique environment contributes positively or negatively to student persistence.

A review of the literature includes descriptions of numerous retention strategies employed by colleges and universities with varying degrees of success. According to Murtaugh, Burns, and Schuster (1999), "Crucial to guiding the development and implementation of measures to improve student retention at an institution is an understanding of the factors that influence retention *at that institution*" (p. 356). In Murtaugh's view, no "one size fits all" occurs in student retention. What works for one institution may not work for another. Still, themes emerge in the literature as to the types of programs that are consistent with higher student persistence.

Academic Program and Policy Environmental Variables

Many variables in the environment may impact a student's persistence, especially during the first year of college, the transition year. Students must attain the skills necessary to successfully navigate in the college setting and it is imperative that colleges offer appropriate programs and policies to help students achieve those skills. With the understanding that each college attracts and enrolls a unique set of students, so too must each college offer a somewhat unique environment for its students. While *all* college programs and policies ultimately impact academic success of students, this section highlights variables that are directly academic in nature, including advising programs, classroom experiences and course offerings, as well as student-faculty interactions.

One well-studied aspect of retention research is the role advising programs play in student persistence. The America College Testing (ACT) service believes that academic advising serves a pivotal role in student retention (Habley & McClanahan, 2004, p. 3). This simple but strong statement is echoed by numerous researchers (Allen & Smith, 2008; Drake, 2011; Gardner, 1998; McArthur, 2005; Nealy, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Students enter college, according to Tinto, with only vague ideas of a potential career path. It is incumbent upon the institution, therefore, to provide developmental advising early on that is both intrusive (required for all students) and pervasive (linked strongly to other student services) (p. 172). Effective advising programs can take many forms, but they tend to have several characteristics in common. Some institutions, such as Monmouth College and West Chester University of Pennsylvania, prefer centralized advising centers where the first-year students (and sometimes upperclass students as

well) seek guidance from a specialized staff (Tinto, 1993). Seidman (2005) confirms others' views of the importance of both formal and informal advising for students. However, he notes that formal advising remains a "hit-and-miss affair" where some students find the information they need and others do not (p. 322).

Effective advising does not just happen. Full-time professional advisors, as well as faculty members, need assessment (Astin, 1993) and subsequent training (Noel, Levitz, Saluri & Associates, 1985; Tinto, 1993) in order to develop the myriad skills that are necessary in good advising. Advising programs have evolved since Ernest Boyer (1987) recommended that "successful colleges offer a well-planned program of advising for all students, one that provides support throughout the freshman year" (p. 251). But, are advising programs still among Boyer's "weakest links in the undergraduate experience" (p. 251)? Assessment of advising has flourished since 1993 when Astin asserted that "… few institutions currently attempt to collect nonclassroom performance information in any systematic way… even though national surveys show academic advising to be among the most heavily criticized services that students receive" (p. 250).

While general agreement exists for the need for "good" advising, there is little to define exactly what "good" advising means. In a student satisfaction survey of the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), Christine Gardner (1998) reported that among areas of greatest discontent by students were parking, food, financial aid, and academic advising. In a renewed focus on one-on-one interaction between faculty and students, one professor voiced a commonly held view when she said, "We need to see [advising] as more than course scheduling" (p. 34). Jayne Drake (2011)

expands this idea that the power of advising is in an institution's ability to communicate, mentor, and build relationships with students. She asserts that advising has moved away from a "prescriptive" approach toward a "decision-making process" wherein students themselves reach their own academic potential through communication and information exchange with an academic advisor (p. 10). Just as classroom experiences teach students particular skills, good advisors "teach students to negotiate the higher education maze, to make effective and thoughtful decisions about their futures, to adapt their life skills to the new academic world, and to cultivate the academic skills and knowledge needed to succeed" (p. 11).

In his quantitative study, McArthur (2005) evaluated the assumption that increased interaction between faculty and students through academic advising affected student persistence at Atlantic Cape Community College in New Jersey. The Arts and Humanities students received augmented academic advising with high faculty outreach while the general population of students received academic advising through the usual channel. The long-standing process was that all students received a postcard from a faculty advisor who offered to meet with them but in reality most students were advised in the career and academic planning center (staffed by non- faculty advisors). The application and assessment of a student survey revealed that the Arts and Humanities students had a higher sense of awareness of faculty advising, they reported greater confidence in information received from advisors and they had significantly higher persistence rates. This study provides only a limited sample of students (one campus and one department), but it confirms the significance of building the student-faculty

relationship through more intentional advising.

In their Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project, Kuh et al. (2005) identified 20 colleges with higher-than-predicted student engagement results on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and higher- than-predicted graduation rates. In their two year study of these colleges, Kuh et al. found that DEEP schools recognized the need for new students to have considerable structure and support to establish themselves academically and socially and to learn how use the learning services offered by their college. These campuses value academic advising and offered peer mentors and peer tutoring programs in convenient campus locations (p. 314).

While it is important to assess student satisfaction with academic advising, it also is useful to have the faculty perspective. In one study, faculty were surveyed about their attitudes toward, and experiences with, academic advising (Allen & Smith, 2008). Allen and Smith describe a skill set in five domains that are needed for strong developmental advising: integration, referral, information, individuation and shared responsibility (para. 6). Also referred to as holistic advising, this type of advising strives to integrate all aspects of a student's life into one cohesive whole. Noteworthy in their findings was the fact that faculty did not necessarily feel responsible for all the kinds of academic advising they believed were important for students to receive. Additionally, not only does higher education lack a widely held definition of academic advising, incentives for strong, comprehensive advising also are rare. Allen and Smith summarize the research this way, "The only reward a faculty member gets for being a good advisor is more advisees" (para. 6). Adhering to the old adage that "what gets measured gets done," the academy

clearly needs to define desired academic advising and place high institutional importance on it with promotion and tenure policies that support it.

In the academic arena, other studies point to the importance of strong academic integration in student persistence rates. Laird, Chen, and Kuh (2008) studied classroom practices at institutions with higher than expected persistence rates and found that retention increases as the level of academic challenge and the amount of academic support to students increases. Broad agreement exists that high levels of overall student academic engagement are consistent with greater retention of students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh et al., 2005; Laird et al., 2008, Tinto, 1993). Laird et al. (2008) defined academic challenge as including the amount of reading and writing students do, the amount of emphasis their courses placed on higher thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis, amount of time spent per week in course preparation, students' perceptions on the institutions' expectation of study time and generally working hard to meet professors' expectations (p. 90). They found that the level of academic challenge and collaborative learning reported by first-year students was higher at institutions with better-than-expected persistence rates, suggesting that students who report doing more academic work and whose courses emphasize more higher learning/thinking skills actually rise to meet the expectations and perform and persist better than expected. Their finding supports other research that suggests that retention levels rise above expectations when institutions provide both academic challenge and appropriate support (Astin, 1993; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

Several studies examined the relationship between institutional focus on the

academic experience and retention and graduation rates (Berrett, 2011; Gansemer-Topf &

Schuh, 2006; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006). Generally, these studies found that the

level of institutional focus, particularly in areas that directly enhance the academic

integration and collaboration of students, is consistent with higher student persistence

rates. Research suggests that meaningful focus on the academic integration of students

manifests itself in many ways: by increased spending on academic initiatives (Gansemer-

Topf & Schuh, 2006), by "good teaching" (Berrett, 2011), by meaningful student-faculty

interaction (anonymous, *Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education*, 2004), and by

first-year seminars that engage students (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Zepke et al.

(2006) used a case study method to examine students (at seven institutions) who returned

after the first year. In their qualitative and quantitative approach, they surveyed students,

faculty and staff. Their data suggest that learner-centeredness improves retention where

students feel they belong in an institutional culture, where they experience good quality

teaching and support for their learning and where their diverse learning preferences are

accommodated (p. 597).

Most students attend four-year colleges with the primary goal of mastery of

advanced knowledge and learning skills, and ultimately to earn a college academic

degree. It follows, then, for these colleges to place great resources in and attention to the

academic enterprise of their students. This section has illustrated how creating an

academic environment that engages, challenges, guides and supports students can

positively impact retention. The next two sections will focus on environmental variables

that indirectly impact the academic setting, specifically through the campus culture and

through co-curricular programs and policies that enhance student persistence.

Social Environmental Variables

Research on student persistence clearly shows that education occurs both in and out of the classroom. Chickering (1974) was among the earlier researchers to link residency in college with persistence in college, with his assertion that students in residence halls are more fully involved and earn higher grade point averages. Astin (1977) concurred with this, reporting that the most important environmental factor associated with completing college was living in a residence hall freshman year and that men living in residence halls are more likely to earn higher grades. Again, Astin (1993) reported that students living in residence halls are less likely than commuters to drop out and they are more likely to earn their degree in four years. Research also supports the theory that students who are engaged in clubs and organizations and who feel a sense of community on campus are more likely to persist in school (Astin, 1993; Murtaugh et al., 1999; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's Student Departure Theory (1993) is one of the most prominent theoretical models of retention. He states that academic integration, as measured by academic performance, and social integration, as measured by participation in college life, is essential to persistence in college. Students who successfully integrate into both spheres of college life are likely to persist. Those who fail to do so are likely to leave.

In their student development framework, Chickering and Reisser (1993) provide a lens through which educators can think about student development. This is important to student persistence because Chickering and Reisser's framework applies equally as well

to curricular as to co-curricular programs. Developing competence, for example, applies to the academic arena in which students master not only broad and deep content knowledge but also the ability to think critically and apply knowledge and develop social and leadership skills. These skills also can be gained in programming out of the classroom.

More recently, in their study of two Scotland universities, Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004) report similar findings. Their research indicates that factors important to attrition include poor choice of courses, limited social support networks, and a general lack of "fit" between student and institution. Specifically, "problems with the social and institutional environment" were among the top reasons for student attrition (p. 623). Nearly half of the sample of non- persisting students indicated that it was difficult to get involved in student activities and they felt alienated by the university atmosphere. Further, they found that students living at home with parents had an especially difficult time developing independence from parents, building friendships with peers and getting involved in campus activities, resulting in higher levels of attrition. Christie et al suggest "the key to success may be the wider social networks in which students become embedded and the extent to which they feel they 'fit in'."

The theme of "fit" also is a finding in a study of negative experiences reported by full- time undergraduate non-persisting students at United Kingdom University (Harrison, 2006). In this study, 151 undergraduates who did not persist into their second year of college were asked to complete a telephone survey. Among the top "negative experiences" cited by these students were personal or social difficulties (27%), including

homesickness and difficulties settling into the university community. Typically, students who do not "fit in" are students who are not participating in campus activities at a level sufficient to engage them and to build meaningful relationships. Student involvement in campus activities and student organizations enhances a sense of belonging which in turn enhances student satisfaction and persistence (Noel et al., 1985). Overall, the more and varied ways that students can be involved on campus, the more likely they are to reach graduation, often regardless of academic ability (Beal & Noel, 1980; Kalsner, 1991).

Research suggests that non-academic expenditures may impact student persistence. Umfress (2010) explored the relationship of student affairs and services expenditures on student persistence and found they were a significant predictor of student retention, surpassed only by the selectivity of the institution. Corella (2010) found that first-year success courses and peer mentoring do have a positive impact on student persistence. First-year success courses are found on many campuses and they exist to engage students into the academic and non-academic campus culture, to build strong relationships with faculty and staff early. Setting expectations and helping students learn the campus resources and services, as well as offering skill such as time management, are commonly part of first-year courses.

Another meaningful social aspect of the student experience on campus has to do with building and maintaining strong relationships with those who, in the students' view, are "the institution" (Himmel, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005). Every staff member on campus, Himmel (2004) suggests, "…is a representative of the institution and can help improve the student experience" (p. 1). In his view, the service students receive helps shape their

perception of the school and that perception is significant in decisions to persist or to leave the institution. Therefore, it is important to develop a campus culture where students are treated as valuable members of the community. Himmel offers example of standards of service, including timely response to a student question, proper greetings (over the phone and in person), and in general, set policies for student interaction that will exceed student expectations. Where Himmel refers to relationship building as "customer service," Kuh et al. (2005) refers to it as student-institution interaction; both focus on a supportive campus environment.

Other Environmental Variables

Admission officers have long understood the value of the physical appearance and friendliness of the campus in attracting students. Everything from location of the campus to campus architecture and landscaping as well as the creation of formal and informal spaces for living and learning impact students' decisions to enroll and to stay at a particular college.

Today's college students have grown accustomed to expect finer amenities on campus, such as state-of-the-art recreation facilities (Murray, 2011) and residence halls, coffee shops and other spaces that foster relationship-building among students and faculty. Comprehensive and costly recreation centers have sprung up on campuses across the country in recent years. In his work on the impact of recreation centers on students, Andreozzi (2010) found that, among college recreation directors surveyed, intramurals and recreation were the most important reasons for building a recreation center, followed by recruitment and retention as the second most important goal. Designing and building

spaces that will enhance the student experience by offering increasing opportunities for programs such as intramurals and other recreational activities leads to greater student involvement. Greater student involvement and engagement in the campus results in stronger student persistence (Astin, 1993, 1997; Kuh et al., 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Kuh et al. (2005) found that DEEP colleges and universities are intentional about campus spaces and facilities in ways that support teaching and learning both in and out of the classroom. Natural settings, academic, and residential buildings can each be designed in ways to promote community and enhance interaction among students, faculty and others. For example, the trails, wooded acres, streams, waterfalls, and breathtaking views at Sewanee provide recreational, academic, and social opportunities for students. Gathering places, designed to encourage engagement, are created wherever possible. Ursinus College, for example, redesigned spaces, adding furniture and amenities, such as whiteboards, to create "interaction areas" near faculty offices and classrooms (p. 95). Campus housing is convenient, well maintained, and educationally enriching. Many of the residence halls at DEEP colleges and universities offer living-learning communities which encourage collaboration among students and faculty.

Lau (2003) suggests that institutional administrators, faculty, and student peers also serve a vital role in improving student retention. Specifically, college officials can provide adequate funding, stimulating and varied educational experiences both in and out of the classroom, and appropriate support services and physical facilities. At the same time, they can pay appropriate attention to targeted groups such as minorities (based on gender or ethnicity on a particular campus). Regarding institutional expenditures, Webber

(2009) studied institutional non- instructional expenditures as related to graduation and

persistence rates and found that student service expenditures may enhance graduation

rates, particularly at institutions with lower entrance test scores and higher Pell Grant

expenditures per student. In his work, student service expenditures include expenses for

the admissions and registrars activities, for activities that contribute to students'

emotional and physical well-being and to their intellectual, cultural, and social

development outside of the institution's formal instruction program (p. 7). Under this

definition, expenses for student organizations, intramurals, student health services and

tutoring programs are included.

Other college characteristics have been found to play a role in retention of college

students (Astin, 1993, Cope, 1978; Kuh, 2010; Oseguera, 2004; Webber & Ehrenberg,

2009). Enrollment size has been studied with inconsistent results. Cope (1978) suggests

that size of student enrollment may play a role in student persistence rates, citing that

smaller colleges have lower attrition rates. Oseguera (2006) confirmed this finding,

noting that small institutional size, private control, and selectivity all have positive

impacts on degree completion, but Umfress (2010) did not find size to be a significant

indicator of student retention.

Students bring many unique characteristics with them when they enroll in college.

Once they arrive on campus, many unique institutional variables influence their

persistence from year-to-year and to the ultimate attainment of a college degree.

Institutional characteristics have been examined by researchers in both qualitative and

quantitative studies. A review of the relevant literature suggests that agreement on

general themes exists. For example, campuses that engage students in and out of the classroom in ways that guide their intellectual and social growth tend to have better retention. There are, however, conflicting findings on the importance of some institutional (environmental) variables, suggesting that the interaction of student input characteristics and institutional environmental variables are critical to understanding retention. Student persistence is maximized when programs and policies on a given campus are appropriate to the students enrolled on *its* campus.

Lapses in the Literature: A Place for Further Study

Although much has been written about student persistence, my study is different for several reasons. First, although it has existed for years as an assessment framework, it is difficult to find studies using Astin's I-E-O model (1993). While not citing Astin specifically, the methodology used by *U.S. News and World Report* supports the need to consider and further apply the I-E-O model in assessing institutional effectiveness. In rating national universities and national liberal arts colleges, *U. S. News* bases 7.5% of the weight for ranking on graduation rate performance (2010). The measurement of an institution's actual six-year graduation rate against its predicted graduation rate indicates added value and shows the effect of the college's programs and policies on the graduation rate of students after controlling for student characteristics (graduation rate performance, 2010, para. 1). Second, where earlier studies using Astin's I-E-O model were applied to single college settings, this study is applied to a broader segment by studying multiple campuses. My study seeks to identify the environmental factors found at the institutional level among a select group of church-related colleges whose first-to-second year retention

rates are consistently stronger than their persistence predictions, based on academic input characteristics alone. Using a case study methodology, this study seeks to identify institutional variables of ELCA colleges whose first-to-second year actual retention rates consistently and significantly outperform their predicted retention rates.

Summary

Studies on student persistence suggest that the ideal way to maximize retention is to attract students with academic preparation and expectations which best fit the mission of the institution and, simultaneously offer a college environment that best fits students' goals, expectations, and abilities. That is not to say that students should not be challenged. To the contrary, the ideal environment will challenge, support, engage, and change the students who enter. This model of linking student characteristics, or inputs, with college characteristics in the form of programs and policies, or environmental variables, creates a powerful path to student persistence. This study seeks to identify institutional variables on three campuses where the environment appears to enhance student retention well above expectations, given the characteristics of students who enroll. The next chapter will outline the methodology for conducting my study.

CHAPTER THREE

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

As indicated in Chapter One, colleges and universities seek to maximize the success of their students through deliberate attention to the fit of students who enroll and through various campus resources including programs, personnel and policies. Student success is ultimately measured in terms of graduation rates; however, institutions of higher learning generally focus efforts on success – or retention – of students between their first and second years of college (Hazel, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Herzog, 2005; Morris, Beck & Mattis, 2008; Noel, Levitz, Salure & Associates, 1985).

Over the last half century much has been written about factors that affect student persistence in college (Abramson, 2009; Astin, 1993; Beal & Noel, 1980; Blaney, 2009; Braxton, 2000; Cope, 1978; Drake, 2011; Guarino & Hocevar, 2005; Himmel, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; Tinto, 1993) and there is general agreement that no "silver bullet" explains why students persist. Broad agreement, however, exists that colleges can positively impact their first-to-second year retention rates and graduation rates by improving the academic profile of their incoming students (Astin, 1993; DeBerard, Speilmans, & Julka, 2004; Marisol & Saskia, 2005; *U.S. News*, 2010). Some researchers (Astin, 1997; DeBerard, Speilmans, & Julka, 2004; McGrath & Braunstein, 1997) suggest models to predict the retention of their incoming students based on their academic profile.

Astin (1993) offers a model that predicts retention through "inputs" or characteristics of the incoming students. In this model, he suggests that the difference between an institution's predicted first-to-second year persistence rate and the actual first-to-second year retention measures the impact of the environment. For some institutions, the environment impacts persistence positively so that the actual rate is higher than the predicted rate while on other campuses the impact of the environment results in an actual persistence rate that is lower than the predicted rate.

While much has been written about variables that impact student persistence in general, and about specific populations of students and their persistence (Marisol & Saskia, 2005; Morris, Beck & Mattis, 2007), relatively little research explores the relationship between an institution's predicted and actual first-to-second year retention rates. Further, no retention studies have focused on a sample of ELCA colleges. The goal of this study was to identify and gain an understanding of the environmental factors present on campuses where the achieved first-to- second year retention rates perform better than the predicted first-to-second year retention rates. Three ELCA colleges were selected for this study because their achieved persistence rates are consistently and significantly above their predicted first-to-second year retention rates.

This chapter provides a rationale for a qualitative case method research design to investigate the questions raised in this study. Further, it outlines the data collection and analysis processes as part of the case study. Finally, trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limits of the study will be explored.

Rationale

As noted in Chapter One, this study focused on three ELCA institutions in a case study approach. It consisted of interviews with various constituencies on each campus, including faculty, administrators, and students. Further, print and web material were reviewed to evaluate how the environment is described on each campus.

This study utilized a case study approach because of the complexity of both the college setting in general and of student persistence specifically. Yin (2009) sums it up simply:

> The distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individualized life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, school performance, international relations, and the maturation of industries. (p. 4)

A qualitative approach was selected for this study because of the need to identify the institutional environmental variables that are present for colleges that consistently outperform expected first-to-second-year retention rates. According to Creswell (2003), qualitative research is preferred when the researcher does not know the specific variables to examine; therefore, beginning with an exploratory study is the best approach. Yin refutes the notion that the various forms of research are hierarchical in which case studies are only appropriate for the exploratory phase. Rather, he asserts, case studies can be exploratory, explanatory and/or descriptive (p. 6).

Unlike quantitative research, which is tightly conceptualized from the beginning, qualitative research is emergent and allows for, and even encourages, change and

refinement of the research questions throughout the study (Creswell, 2003). Specifically, this exploratory study sought to identify specific institutional characteristics for further, perhaps quantitative, consideration in future studies.

While all studies include both inductive and deductive reasoning, the preferred thinking for a study of this nature is inductive reasoning. Babbie (1990) explains inductive logic as that thinking which moves from particular instances to general principles or from facts to theories. He provides an example of inductive thinking,

> Using inductive logic, you might begin by noting that Socrates is mortal and observe a number of other men as well. You might then note that all the observed men were mortal, thereby arriving at the tentative conclusion that all men are mortal. (p. 12)

Similarly, it is a fact that some colleges consistently outperform their expected first-to-second year retention rates while others consistently perform at or below expected first-to-second year retention rates. The challenge of this study was to gather as many facts and opinions as possible in order to offer a framework for understanding the environmental characteristics present on these ELCA campuses that positively influence the persistence of their students.

Research Design

Yin (2009) offers a unique illustration for how research is to be designed, with emphasis on both the big picture and on the intricate details:

> The cover illustration depicts a mandala, a Hindu or Buddhist symbol of the universe. Creation of a mandala, much like the creation of a research design, requires looking at the "big picture" as well as tremendous attention to detail – a mandala made of sand can take days to create because of the precise positioning of the pieces, which sometimes are individual grains of sand. The mandala also shows the interrelatedness of the parts of a whole, again reflecting research design, in which each

element shapes a complete study. (p. xix)

Johnson and Christensen (2004) define research design as "… the outline, plan or strategy you are going to use to seek an answer to your research question(s)" (p. 275). While this may seem like a recipe approach where having the exact measurements of each ingredient is essential to the outcome, Yin (2011) cautions against confusing research design as a "logical blueprint" with the research design as a "logistics plan" (p. 75). In other words, it is important to thoughtfully plan and logically design the process to be followed in order to answer the research questions while avoiding a plan that is too prescriptive. Indeed, Yin suggests that one of the benefits of qualitative research is that the researcher can decide the depth of design work to be done prior to beginning the study and the researcher should be open to change during the course of the study.

A critical part to the design of a study is identifying the research questions. In qualitative research, the questions typically begin with "how" or "what" (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Yin, 2011). To restate from Chapter One, this study sought to examine the following questions at three ELCA institutions:

1. What specific programs, policies and/or activities do faculty and administrators believe may contribute to higher than predicted first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates and to attrition among first-year students?

2. What programs, policies, and/or activities do second-year students believe may contribute to first-to-second year student persistence and to attrition among first-year students?

3. What practices, policies, and/or programs do these institutions appear to share in

common that may contribute to higher levels of first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates?

These research questions are exploratory in nature and are an essential foundation to this study. To answer these questions, I was intentional in talking with a broad spectrum of stakeholders across the campus in order to gain an in-depth understanding about the college environment for each of the three campuses identified as cases for study. The goal was to gain an understanding of programs, policies and other factors in the campus environment that are thought to impact student persistence.

These research questions were best answered by an in-depth interview with stakeholders and subsequent in-depth analysis of the data from each campus. Retention research has identified many programs designed to enhance student persistence (Abramson, 2009; Allen & Smith, 2008; Beal & Noel, 1980; Braxton, 2000; Drake, 2011; Kuh et al., 2005, Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). The goal of this study was to identify specific characteristics common to the programs, policies and experiences of first-year students on each outperforming campus.

Yin's (2009) model for case study as a research design proposes five components:
1. A study's questions;
2. its propositions, if any;
3. its unit(s) of analysis;
4. the logic linking the data to the propositions; and,
5. the criteria for interpreting the findings. (p. 27)

Much of the research on retention focuses on a particular group of students or on a particular program as its primary unit of analysis. In contrast, this study focuses more comprehensively on an institution as its primary unit of analysis. This opens the door to

the possibility that it is a combination of institutional environmental factors that are

consistent with better than expected student persistence rather than a single program,

policy or other environmental variable. Further, while the programs and policies found

on each campus differ, there are shared characteristics that pertain to persistence or

attrition.

Logically linking the data to the propositions takes place primarily in the data

analysis process. Designing a study with this linkage in mind is important and

contributes to the researcher's ability to collect data of sufficient quality and quantity to

posit theories based on the study. In this study, care was taken to craft interview

questions that were neither too broad nor too narrow in scope.

Case Study Approach

"A case study is a comprehensive description and explanation of the many

components of a given social situation" (Babbie, 1990, p. 32). "Whereas most research

attempts to limit the number of variables considered, the case study seeks to maximize

them" (p. 33). According to Yin (2009), a case study is the preferred option when the

researcher seeks to answer "… 'how' or 'why' questions, when the investigator has little

control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-

life context" (p. 2). In a case study, Yin asserts, more variables of interest than data

points will be found; therefore, it is critical to use "multiple sources of evidence, with

data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion" (p. 2).

A case study method was conducive to this analysis because it is a research

method that provides a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases (Creswell,

2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). As is true of case studies, these cases are bounded

systems (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004) in which the researcher attempts

to find out what goes on in a complex system or organization in a specific time. In this

study, the bounded systems include three ELCA liberal arts college settings.

A multiple-case strategy is preferable because studying three institutions allows

for a more complete analysis of the possible differences and similarities among those

colleges that outperform in terms of student persistence. Several advantages to studying

more than one case exist (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Among these is the fact that

examining multiple cases allows for a comparative type of study in which cases are

evaluated for similarities and differences. Multiple cases also allow for triangulation of

the data, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the study.

Description of the Sample: ELCA Institutions

The Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America (ELCA) provide a sample of 26

small-to-medium-sized liberal arts colleges for this study. Data about these colleges are

readily available and the collegial relationships that exist among the colleges provided a

level of trust and openness to participation in the study. Though the ELCA-affiliated

colleges and universities vary in a number of ways, they are alike in their mission to

provide a liberal arts undergraduate education that is, for the most part, dedicated to a

high level of interaction between students and faculty. Further, each of the ELCA

colleges remains loyal to its historical roots in the traditions of the Evangelical Lutheran

Church of America.

The ELCA national office, located in Chicago, Illinois, has been collecting comprehensive data from several administrative divisions across each of its 28 college campuses for nearly 40 years. With the recent closing of two of the colleges, the remaining 26 are loosely bound together due to their shared affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Each campus has its own autonomous, self-appointed, and self-sustaining board of trustees. The ELCA headquarters provides limited financial resources to each campus; however, its division of vocation and education provides human resources that organize data sharing and annual meetings of various groups of college leaders, including presidents, academic affairs, student affairs, church relations and campus ministers, faculty, and enrollment management officers. Additionally, the ELCA church-wide office works closely with the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America (LECNA) to coordinate and execute outreach to Lutheran students, families, and churches, such as college fairs and collaborative marketing efforts.

In 2009-2010, the most recent year for which data were available, the ELCA colleges and universities enrolled a total of 53,692 students and ranged in total enrollment from 505 to 3,128 students (*ELCA,* 2010). These campuses focus primarily on the education of undergraduate students. Over 95% of the students enrolled on ELCA campuses were undergraduates and only six campuses enrolled graduate students in 2009-2010. Nearly 25% of the students enrolled on the ELCA campuses in 2009-2010 were first-time, first-year students and the freshmen classes ranged in size from 113 to 739. Together, the ELCA colleges enroll students from all 50 states and from six of the seven continents.

The ELCA campuses offer considerable interaction with faculty as the average student to faculty ratio was 13.2:1 in 2009-2010, with a range of 10.6:1 to 18.2:1. In terms of endowment resources, the mean endowment fund market value for ELCA colleges in 2009-1010 was $61,623,728, with a range from $4,074,603 to $247,991,349 (*ELCA*, 2010).

In terms of selectivity, the mean acceptance rate in 2009-2010 was 66%, with a range from 40% to 95%. In the aggregate, 75.3% of the fall 2008 first-time, first-year degree seeking students returned for their second year, and first-to-second-year retention rates ranged from a high of 93.2% to a low of 46.6%.

The ELCA data include retention rates from entering freshman cohorts to the second year, from entry to third year and from entry to graduation (see Appendix D). This study will focus on first-to-second year retention only.

Selection of Cases

A critical element of a successful case study lies in the selection of the cases to be examined. In my study, the selection of college campuses with the greatest *variance* between predicted and actual first-to-second year persistence rates, rather than simply the selection of those institutions with the highest retention rates, is central to the design. The selection of these "best case" colleges provides fertile ground for data collection and allows for a more thorough contrast and comparison of significant variables.

Research clearly shows that academic performance in high school is the single best predictor of college persistence (Astin, 1993, 1997; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; *U.S. News*, 2010). Cumulative grade point average, rank in class, and standardized

test scores are among the variables that demonstrate high school academic achievement. This study is not about simply examining those institutions that achieve the highest retention rates. Such a study would likely show that they have more selective admission programs and are therefore able to bring in stronger academically prepared freshmen. Rather, through a case study of three higher education institutions, this study sought to identify how campuses achieve first-to-second year retention rates that cannot be explained by the quality of their incoming classes alone. Data for the 26 colleges affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) were used to identify colleges whose achieved persistence rates deviate from their expected rates.

Before selecting cases for this study, each of the college names was changed in order to mask the identity of each institution. To further protect the identity of these institutions, and particularly of the three selected as case studies, the description of the colleges are intentionally vague so that the reader cannot determine the identity of the case study institutions.

In an effort to identify the cases for this study, ELCA college retention rates were examined for the entering classes from 1999 to 2008, the most recent ten year time span for which data were available. The national ELCA headquarters collects and publishes an annual comprehensive database of institutional and student characteristics. In this database, high school grade point averages are not reported, but rank in class is available; therefore, this study used rank in class as the measure of academic success in high school. For each college, the percent of enrolled freshmen in the top 10% of their high school class is plotted on the x-axis and first-to-second-year aggregate retention rate is plotted

on the y-axis. When academic quality (as indicated by percentage of students in the top ten percent of high school) of the incoming class on each campus and the first-to-second year retention rates of those classes are analyzed in a scatterplot (see Appendix M), a direct positive correlation exists. Specifically, the greater the percent in the top ten percent of high school class, the stronger the first-to-second year retention rate. Interestingly, some colleges fall directly on the line of "best fit," meaning their actual first- to-second year retention rates are equal to their expected first-to-second year retention rates given the profile of their incoming students. Other colleges' actual retention rates fall below the trend line, or lower than expected. Ten colleges, however, consistently fall above the trend line, meaning their students persist at a rate higher than expected given the inputs (academic profile as defined by percent in the top ten percent) of the incoming class. The greater the distance a college falls above the trend line, the more that institution outperforms the expected retention rate (see Appendix M).

Appendix N shows which colleges outperform expected retention rates each year during 1999 to 2008. Based on this ELCA college methodology, 10 of the 28 colleges outperformed its expected first-to-second year retention during this time period. They are highlighted in Appendix N as Colleges A, C, D, F, G, H, I, J, N, and R. For the purposes of this study, institutions with actual first-to-second year retention rates that were both significantly and consistently greater than the expected retention rates were selected. More specifically, institutions whose first-to-second year retention rates were five or more points higher than the expected retention rates for five or more years during the decade from 1999-2008 are considered significant and consistent outperformers. Based

on this methodology, institutions worthy of further study are Colleges G, I, J, N, and R.

Data from *U.S. News and World Report* support this methodology. Each year *U.S. News and World Report* publishes college rankings. Among the factors used in determining the ranks is actual versus predicted six-year graduation rate, which counts for 7.5% of the overall ranking (*U.S. News*, 2010). The predicted graduation rate is calculated in a regression that is based upon characteristics of the incoming class as well as institutional characteristics. These institutional characteristics include expenditures per student, proportion of the entering class in the top 25% of their high school class, whether the school is public or private, and proportion of student body receiving Pell grants (R. Morse, personal communication, October 26, 2009). According to Robert Morse of *U.S. News*, "this indicator of added value shows the effect of the college's program and policies on the graduation rate of students after controlling for spending and student characteristics such as test scores and the proportion receiving Pell grants" (R. Morse, personal communication, October 26, 2009). If the actual graduation rate is higher than the predicted rate, the college is outperforming expectations. Unfortunately, *U.S. News* calculates predicted graduation rates only for national universities and national liberal arts colleges, so data are only available for nine of the ELCA colleges.

Using this *US News* methodology to identify the colleges, the most consistent over performers are Colleges A, C, D, F, G, I, J, N, and R (see Appendix O). Further, this methodology identifies College I, College J, and College N as institutions that have outperformed by at least 10 percentage points in at least five of the ten years between 1998 and 2007. The *U.S. News* data support the ELCA scatterplot finding that College I,

College J, and College N are institutions worthy of study because they outperform both consistently and significantly with respect to first- to-second-year retention rates and six-year graduation rates. For confidentiality, we will refer to these colleges as Jay College, Nile University, and Turner College.

Gaining Access to Institutions

Though the *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis* data are shared annually with each of the ELCA colleges, I requested approval from the ELCA Headquarters to use the data for this study (see Appendix B) and approval has been granted (see Appendix C). The following illustrates the steps taken to access participants on the three campuses selected for study. First, I secured approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my graduate institution, Loyola University Chicago. I also obtained necessary approval through the IRBs on each of the three campuses I planned to visit. An admission officer or other administrator at each college was asked to serve as a point of contact, or liaison, for his or her campus community. Each institutional liaison was sent a letter of institutional invitation (see Appendix E) seeking institutional cooperation (see Appendix F) as well as a summary of the research (see Appendix G). Each was asked to identify seven to eight potential participants for the interview portion of the study as well as to provide a letter of cooperation from the institution (see Appendix F). The summary explained why the study is being conducted and what data were being sought (Yin, 2009). Each potential participant, in turn, was sent a letter (see Appendix P) by the liaison with a summary of the research (see Appendix G) to explain the nature of the study and to ask him or her to participate in a face-to-face interview on campus at a mutually agreed

upon date and time. At the time of the interview, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent to participate form (see Appendix I).

Among administrators, the most desired participants were those with at least three years of experience on their campus and who know and understand their campus culture and recent history. Among faculty, the most desired participants were those with at least three years of full-time experience on their campus and who teach at least one course per semester that predominantly enrolls first-year students. Students desired for the study were full-time students who entered as freshmen and who were in or had just completed their second year at the institution. Among students, faculty and administrators, gender and ethnic diversity was desired but not required. A high level of interaction with first-year students, and subsequent understanding of the first-year experience, was essential for all participants.

Data Collection

Interview Data Collection

Qualitative research, in contrast to quantitative studies, occurs in natural settings (Creswell, 2003) where events and human behavior occur. Although there were no pre-determined variables to test, as is the case in quantitative studies, the method of data collection must be open to all relevant ideas and thoughts of those on the campuses under study. The goal of this study was to describe, in as much detail as possible, the environment on the three over- performing campuses, with regard to first-to-second-year persistence. Thus, data collection took place in the campus environment in which the desired results occurred and the interview process included participants from across the

campus.

In this qualitative study, interviews with various stakeholders on the three campuses were conducted for the purpose of ascertaining perceptions of variables that they feel contribute to better than expected persistence rates on their campuses. The liaison on each campus was asked to identify one representative from each of the following areas: student affairs, academic affairs, and enrollment management. If any of the campuses had an employee whose main responsibility is to coordinate student retention efforts, he/she was asked to participate in the study as well. In order to gain a faculty perspective, two faculty members who teach primarily first-year students were requested. Finally, seven to ten students on each campus participated in the study, for a total of 26 students. Twenty-two of the student participants were second year students. These 13 to 15 participants from each campus, 48 in total, were chosen because together they provide a holistic perspective of the campus. They also represent the areas that are central to the student experience as well as from students and faculty who are at the heart of the student experience. The intent was to select participants with a deep understanding of campus culture, programs, and policies that may impact student persistence. Print and web material included the college viewbook and the college website. These were reviewed for each campus.

Interviews can take one of many forms (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), including in-depth interviewing, ethnographic interviewing, phenomenological interviewing, elite interviewing, and focus group interviewing. This study employed in-depth interviewing. In-depth interviewing is much more conversation-like than scripted interviews, though

the researcher does start by exploring a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). With in-depth interviewing, it is important that the "participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest unfolds as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (p. 108). Since multiple cases and multiple individuals were interviewed, it also was important to have common structure to the interview conversations.

An elite interview is an in-depth interview with individuals who are considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well-informed people in an organization; they are selected because they are in a position to have expertise in an area relevant to the research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Thought leaders in enrollment management, student affairs and academic affairs who are knowledgeable about student persistence in college and who are knowledgeable about their institutions were selected, as well as students and faculty who live the first-year experience.

According to Johnson and Christensen (2004), an alternative to collecting data through a written survey method is to collect data through interviews. "An interview is a data-collection method in which an interviewer (the researcher) asks questions of an interviewee (the research participant)" (p. 178). The interviews in this study were conducted face-to-face and are thus called in-person interviews. In-person interviews require the interviewer to be as impartial as possible and to appropriately use probes or prompts to obtain response clarity or additional information. In any interview process, it is imperative that the researcher establishes trust and rapport (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) with the interviewees as early as possible in the conversation.

During the interview, a balance must be struck so that the interviewer maintains direction for the interview while allowing the participant the flexibility to provide all relevant information, including information that the interviewer does not anticipate. Yin (2009) asserts that by the nature of a case study, it is the interviewer, not the respondent, whose behavior needs to be constrained.

Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 75 minutes. Creswell (2003) suggests using an interview protocol for recording information during an interview (see Appendix J for administration and faculty and Appendix K for students). This protocol provided instructions to the interviewer, key research questions with relevant probes, and space for recording the participant's comments and for the interviewer's reflective notes. With the participant's permission (see Appendix I), each interview and focus group was audiotaped for transcription later by a transcriptionist who was asked to sign a Confidentiality Agreement Form (see Appendix L).

Document Data Collection

Using Yin's (2009) framework for case studies as a guide for gathering data, several sources of data were collected. First and most significantly, the interview provided data. Direct observation was considered on each campus. Interview data are essential because they provide insight into all aspects of a student's college experience, including academic and non-academic programs, facilities, and general campus climate issues. Direct observation provides information about unspoken aspects of the college community, such as types of behaviors, both formal (during the interviews) and informal (observation of the campus and people in general).

Data collection also included an analysis of how each college portrays itself to potential students. The general college literature (viewbook) and the college website were evaluated. A document analysis rubric (see Appendix O) was used to categorize observations about these documents.

Observation Data Collection

According to Christianson and Johnson (2004), in qualitative observation, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (p. 188). As such, the researcher must decide what is important and relevant observation data must be recorded by the researcher. While visiting each of the three campuses, I used a field log and an observation rubric (see Appendix P) to note obvious observations about the campus environment, about the interviews and about the interviewees. Observations noted included behaviors and attitudes of members of the community as well as observations about the physical aspects of each campus. Though the interview transcriptions serve as the primary source of data, the field log provides further description of the environment on each campus.

<center>**Data Analysis**</center>

Interview Data Analysis

Researchers agree that data analysis procedures vary according to the type of research method being employed (Babbie, 1990; Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Yin, 2009) and consensus exists that case study data analysis is particularly complicated and time-consuming (Creswell, 2003; Yin, 2009). The generally accepted concept of data analysis for case studies is that it is best done as an integrated, reflective,

and iterative process as opposed to an orderly and linear process.

I followed six steps for qualitative research analysis, as described by Creswell (2003). Once the data were collected, they were organized and prepared for analysis. Interviews were transcribed and field notes were typed. Second, I read through the data to gain an overall sense of it and to reflect on it. During this stage, I made additional researcher notes about the data. As Yin (2011) points out, qualitative research focuses on much more than the occurrence of events. It is imperative to focus on the *meaning* of the events and the collection of concepts that are part of the events themselves (p. 93). As such, in this step, I looked beyond the mere occurrences of events and identify the concepts in the college environments that are consistent (or not) in these cases. Step 3 involved the process of coding the data into emerging categories or groups. This step was particularly iterative as I sought to answer the question "what is this about" (Creswell, 2003, p. 192), making notes about all possible topics and clustering similar topics. Using this list, I returned to the data to organize them into the coded categories, making sure to fit all data into one or more themes and to add new codes as needed. Yin (2003) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992) encourage researchers to categorize codes into meaningful clusters such as "codes that address topics that readers would expect to find, codes that are surprising, and codes that address a larger theoretical perspective in the research" (Yin, 2009, p. 193). I identified and utilized similar clusters in my data analysis. In Step 4, I used the coding process to describe the institutional setting and to identify themes for analysis. This process identified five to seven themes that will appear in their own headings in the findings section of the study. Interconnected themes were

identified here. The themes were then analyzed across institutions and across types of interview participants. For example, themes identified by faculty from all institutions, by students from all institutions or by administrators from all institutions were evaluated. Next, the qualitative narrative was written to convey the findings of the study. This section is divided into sections based on the themes that emerged and that address my study's research questions. Diagrams present the themes and their interrelated nature in a visual format. The final step in the data analysis was an interpretation of the data. This section allows the researcher to present a personal understanding of the data and includes comparing and contrasting the findings.

The interviews were tabulated to identify both the scope of factors and for 1frequency of those factors within each institution and across the three institutions. For example, data from each campus were analyzed to identify patterns in environmental factors across divisions. Specifically, how are the responses provided by enrollment management, student affairs, academic affairs, faculty and students on a given campus similar or dissimilar? Other patterns in environmental characteristics emerged as data from each particular group of interviewees (academic affairs staff, enrollment management staff, student affairs staff, faculty, and students) across the three campuses were analyzed.

Document Review Analysis

Admission brochures and websites from each campus were analyzed to gain insight into how the environment on each campus is portrayed. Themes and patterns that confirm or contrast from the interview data were identified.   The goal was to identify

characteristics that further describe the environment on these ELCA campuses with strong first-to-second year persistence rates.

Observation Data Analysis

Data in the form of field notes from observations made while visiting each of the three campuses (such as proximity to nearby towns, about the buildings, about the campus culture, such as degree of helpfulness or friendliness) were reviewed and coded for themes. While observation data is a less significant portion of the overall data, it serves as a comparison or confirmation of interview and document findings.

Role of the Researcher

Inasmuch as qualitative research is interpretative (Creswell, 1993), the role of the researcher is critical to the process. In one-on-one interviews the researcher is part of the data collection process (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Yin, 2009, 2011). Therefore, it is important to understand the researcher's background, experience, assumptions with the subject matter, and the impact they might have on the study. While the researcher must take care to minimize bias, Creswell (2003) asserts that the researcher's contribution is actually more beneficial than detrimental.

My perceptions of institutional impact on student retention have been formed by over 30 years of work in enrollment management at ELCA liberal arts colleges and over 20 of those years as the chief enrollment officer. From 1982 through 1988 I served in ascending roles from admission counselor to director of admission at Roanoke College and then returned as vice president for enrollment and dean of admissions and financial aid in 2007. From 1988 until 2007 I served as vice president for enrollment at Carthage

College, a Midwestern ELCA college.

As chief enrollment officer on both campuses, retention initiatives fell under my direction. I have been instrumental in working with faculty, student affairs staff, and cabinet and trustee leaders to initiate change designed to improve the student experience and therefore enhance student persistence. I bring knowledge about higher education in general and experiences in improving the facilities and programs on liberal arts campuses that have resulted in improvements in retention and graduation rates.

My current and previous experiences also mean that I bring some bias to this study. While I will make every effort to remain objective in collecting and analyzing the data from these case studies, my experiences in the college setting have fostered some assumptions about what works – and does not work – in student persistence. I begin this study with the knowledge that student retention is a complex phenomenon with many variables that are directly under the control of the collegiate institution and many which cannot be directly controlled by college leaders. I also understand that as leaders on a campus change over time, so do the strategies and initiatives that shape the student experience. This is why the institutional cases for examination in this study are those that have over achieved expected retention rates over a period of time. The assumption is that sustained performance is more a reflection of campus culture than a reflection of any given individual leaders.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness

In both qualitative and quantitative studies, it is incumbent on the researcher to take every step possible to ensure that the research is accurate and credible (Creswell, 2004). In quantitative research, this takes the form of reliability and generalizability and the quantitative researcher attempts to structure the study in such a way that it can be duplicated by others, that the variables are "clean," and that the findings can be generalized to a greater population.

The concept of validity is widely accepted among quantitative researchers, but is controversial among qualitative researchers (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Yin, 2009, 2011). Validity in quantitative research refers to "the accuracy of the inferences, interpretations, or actions made on the basis of test scores" (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 140). When speaking of validity in qualitative research, scholars typically refer to research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy, and therefore defensible (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Suggested strategies for ensuring validity include the use of reflexivity, transparency, negative-case sampling, triangulation of the data, peer review (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Yin, 2011), and clarification of the bias of the researcher (Creswell, 2003).

Triangulation of the data involves the analysis of data from different sources to help inform a phenomenon and ensure credibility. The intentional collection of data from various institutional representatives from multiple campuses (for a total of 18 interviewees) is designed to allow for greater triangulation and dependability of the data.

Further, when interview data are compared and contrasted with observational data and document analysis data, greater triangulation of the data occurs.

According to Yin (2011), transparency is the first objective for building trustworthiness and credibility (p. 19). Transparency involves doing research that is described and documented in such a way that the reader can follow, understand and even replicate the study. Such scrutiny of the method, evidence and findings, Yin asserts, results in "criticism, support or refinement" (p. 19). In this study, I have been very intentional in the selection of cases and I have been very deliberate in describing the process in steps that are as methodical as can be found in qualitative research while acknowledging that by definition qualitative research in general and case studies more specifically are inherently fluid in design.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality is one ethical consideration in qualitative studies. Every effort has been made to protect the identity of the institutions and the individuals involved in this study. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the institutions and participants. Further, the data that were collected, in written and audiotaped formats, have been kept in a secure environment, namely in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed within two years after completion of the study. Only the researcher knows the true identity of the interview participants.

Objectivity in any study is a goal of the researcher. The nature of qualitative study, in particular, lends itself to the potential for bias on the part of the researcher. While objectivity is preferable in any study, some researchers feel strongly that the

researcher should express his or her own opinions (Staines, Johnson & Bonacci, 2008).

Not only is it unrealistic to believe that researcher bias can be completely eliminated, the

authors assert that researcher bias is beneficial.

> Students will notice in much of what they read that the writing, even in a
> professional journal, seems to have a particular "bent" on their topic.
> Sometimes students ask if all scholarly writing should not be absolutely
> objective. We believe that "absolute objectivity" is an ideal that we have
> never seen in practice. For any social scientist to claim that he or she
> approaches a topic with no preconceptions, no prior-held beliefs and no
> prejudices is, we believe, disingenuous…. What differentiates scientific
> writing from opinion papers, however, is the use of substantiation with
> research…. (pp. 56-57)

Therefore the researcher must make every attempt to balance objectivity with

substantive research and prior experience. Reflexivity is one way for a researcher to

maintain this balance. Reflexivity is a process in which the researcher engages in critical

self-reflection throughout the process in order to mitigate the potential for bias (Johnson

& Christensen, 2004). This self- awareness is equally important in the selection of cases,

the interview and data collection process, the data analysis and in presenting the results.

Limitations of the Study

Studies of every kind have potential weaknesses or limitations and it is helpful to

understand those at the outset. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), limitations

may arise from the conceptual framework and the design of the study. Setting boundaries

on what the study does and does not intend to do sets realistic expectations about the

study. In qualitative studies, questions of generalizability, dependability, confirmability,

and personal bias of the researcher pose potential challenges for the study.

Personal bias of the researcher is a limitation, especially in a case study approach. As noted earlier, with 30 years of experience in enrollment management, I have definite thoughts about retention and how the campus environment impacts retention, either positively or negatively. In order to minimize personal bias, I have remained conscious of the risk throughout the process. Identifying and noting my biases during the process of data collection and analysis served to ensure that my biases do not affect my interpretation of the data. Generalizability is another limitation in qualitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Yin, 2011). Case studies, by their descriptive nature, make it challenging to broadly generalize the findings. The environmental factors that emerged from this multi-campus study are likely to be important factors for these colleges. Further study will be required to ascertain whether they can be broadly generalized to other college campuses. The identification of possible variables for further study and the ability to identify *characteristics* of environmental variables important for other similar campuses is the goal of this study. Although specific programs and policies that positively affect retention on these campuses may not work on another campus (McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Murtaugh et al., 1999), characteristics of these programs may apply to other small liberal arts campuses. Therefore, the merit of this study lies both in the offering of a method for campuses to assess their retention as well as offering characteristics of programs and policies for retention enhancement.

Lastly, limitations exist in the data that are collected. The participants' willingness to be totally candid and forthright in the information they share also may limit the results of the study. A case study relies on accurate and comprehensive

information and insights of the individuals being interviewed. Their awareness of issues

connected with retention on their campuses, their longevity there, and their degree of

knowledge about the subject will impact their ability to provide meaningful observations.

Care was taken in the selection of appropriate candidates for the on-campus interviews

and interviewees were assured of confidentiality in order to encourage candor in their

responses. Triangulation of the interview data with document review and observation

sought to overcome these limitations.

Summary

Various research methods have their strengths and weaknesses and there are no

perfect ways to go about qualitative research. Often, there are many tradeoffs.

Qualitative studies work best when exploring a problem or phenomenon where the

researcher seeks to explore with the goal to identify variables for further study. With the

benefit of exploration, the scholar must balance challenging issues such as bias, lack of

generalizability and transferability. With a carefully constructed methodology, a

qualitative case study will be credible.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

We manage to bring in students who know what they're getting into, and then find here
what they thought they were going to find
—Professor Brown, Jay College

Introduction

As noted in Chapter One, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that

help colleges achieve higher than predicted first-to-second year retention rates. More

specifically this study seeks to identify the institutional *environmental* characteristics

that are present on campuses with higher than expected first-to-second year retention

rates. Understanding why some colleges meet and exceed their predicted first-to-

second year retention rates, based on the students they enroll, may help more colleges

achieve the retention rates they desire. In light of this purpose, this study pursues the

following questions:

1. At three Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America (ELCA) institutions, what

   specific programs, policies, and/or activities do faculty and administrators believe

   may contribute to higher than predicted first-to-second year persistence among

   undergraduates and to attrition among first-year students?

2. At three ELCA institutions, what programs, policies, and/or activities do second-year

   students believe may contribute to first-to-second year student persistence and to

   attrition among undergraduate, first-year students?

3. What practices, policies, and/or programs do selected ELCA institutions appear to share in common that may contribute to higher levels of first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates?

The first research question addresses characteristics of programs, policies and activities identified by faculty and administrators at three ELCA campuses with first-to-second year retention that is higher than expected. These findings are outlined and discussed in this chapter.

The second research question explores characteristics that students at three ELCA campuses identify as meaningful to persistence of students from the first-to-second year. Finally, the third research question identifies characteristics in the environment that are common among the three ELCA campuses that contribute to first-to-second year retention.

Data Collection

Interview and focus group data were collected from three Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) institutions. To provide anonymity, these institutions will be referred to as Jay College (JC), Nile University (NU) and Turner College (TC). One-on-one interviews were conducted with two faculty members and one representative each from Academic Affairs, Enrollment Management, and Student Affairs on each campus, for a total of 18 interviews. Additionally, one-to-two focus groups with students were conducted during each campus visit, for a total of 26 students. Two focus groups were conducted at Jay College with three students in one group and four in the other and included six freshmen and one senior. One focus group was held at Turner College, with

a total of ten freshmen participants. The focus group at Nile University included nine

students. Since this visit occurred during the summer school session, limited availability

of students resulted in representatives from all years, the majority of whom had just

completed their first year. As with each institution, each individual faculty and staff

member will be identified by a pseudonym. Appendix Q identifies each interview

participant from each institution. Data analysis also included researcher observations and

recruitment materials (brochures and websites) for each institution.

Data Analyses

The process of data analysis included the transcription of all interviews and focus

groups, followed by careful reading and theming of the transcripts. To improve accuracy

and validity, member checking was done with interviewees. Interview participants were

each sent a transcription of their interview for review and the opportunity to provide

additional information. Member checking with students was done during the focus

groups, with frequent restatement of information and summaries provided by the

interviewer for clarification and approval. Field notes, interview notes, observation notes

and recruitment materials were also reviewed and analyzed. Interview transcripts and

notes, observation notes, and recruitment material notes address the first research

question. Focus group transcripts and notes address the second research question. All

forms of data address the third research question which seeks to identify programs,

policies and practices that these three institutions have in common that appear to advance

student retention. Data coding is a time-consuming but important part of qualitative

studies. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) describe the need for this deductive process:

> … the masses of accumulated data must be organized and reduced so that the ideas, themes, units, patterns, and structures within them begin to become apparent. This involves a formalized process of analysis, which, in turn, involves some form of coding or categorizing data. (p. 45)

Data coding in this study entailed taking notes while listening to audio versions of each interview and focus group. Further notes were made while reviewing written transcripts of the interviews and focus groups and with recruitment materials. Electronic word maps were created from the interviews and focus groups to aid in the process of identifying key words and phrases. As themes emerged, sub-categories were created and notated. Illustrative quotes were highlighted for use later to serve as examples of themes as they were presented.

Descriptions of Institutions and Respondents

According to *U.S. News and World Report*, all three institutions visited in this study are national liberal arts colleges that focus on undergraduate studies. Jay College and Nile University are in rural settings while Turner College is in a suburban setting. Each institution is selective in admitting students and each has total undergraduate enrollment of between 2,000 and 2,500 students. All three institutions are ranked in the top 125 by *U.S. News and World Report*. One is in the top 75, another is in the top 100, and the third is in the top 125.

Like all 26 ELCA colleges, these three institutions were founded by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The ELCA, headquartered in Chicago, IL, represents a mainline protestant denomination that is the seventh largest religious body and the largest Lutheran body in the United States (Jenks, 2010). Through the years,

each of these institutions has maintained ties with the ELCA, though in practice, each institution is self-governed by a self-perpetuating board and each receives limited funding from the national church body. True to their roots, the three institutions value their Lutheran heritage while welcoming students of all faiths to their campuses.

The faculty and staff who were interviewed each had significant experience in higher education and most had significant experience at their present institution. The data analysis of expected and actual first-to-second year retention rates included the years between 1999 and 2008, the most recent years for which data were available. While many interviewees worked at their present institution during those years, some spoke from their general knowledge of retention efforts or current environmental factors on their campus rather than from knowledge of the environment during the years from 1999 to 2008. Though their titles ranged from lecturer to full professor, each of the faculty teaches classes which enroll primarily first-year students. Academic Affairs representatives ranged in responsibilities from institutional research to provost. Student Affairs representatives ranged from directing a particular area within student life to the dean of student life. Representatives from Enrollment Management tended to be at the dean or vice presidential level. None of the three campuses employed a person whose *primary* responsibility is to oversee retention programs.

This chapter will identify the themes that emerged from interviews with faculty and administrators and in the student focus groups. The first research question regarding retention themes identified by faculty and staff is addressed through a discussion of the findings of those interviews. Student focus groups inform the second research question

in which themes important to retention, as identified by second-year students, are presented. Finally, the third research question, the identification of themes common to students, faculty and staff on all three campuses are presented.

Persistence Themes Identified by Faculty and Administrators

Review of interview transcripts and field notes produced several themes identified by faculty and administrators as important to the persistence of students at their institution. Several themes emerged that were common to administrators and faculty on these three campuses. Interviewees were asked (a) to identify the reasons they believe students persist at their college, (b) to identify programs, policies and practices that were important to students' decisions to stay, or to leave, their institution, and (c) to share institutional goals and plans for retention on their campus.

Several themes emerged as faculty and administrators described the first-year experience and identified factors they found important to student persistence on their campus. Faculty on each campus spoke consistently about the role of student-institutional fit and the importance of aligning student expectations with the reality of the student experience on campus. There was also great consistency in the articulation of a strong sense of community on each campus. Faculty and administrators richly described the ways in which their campus develops relationships with students. Additionally, they identified strong relationships among faculty and administrator colleagues as important contributors to the overall sense of community. They also identified the value of services and facilities they felt contribute to student persistence. Among the reasons, as identified by faculty and administrators, that some students do not persist, are a lack of strong

student-institution fit and health, social, or financial reasons.

The following section explores programs, policies, and practices that influence student persistence: student-institution fit, a culture of community, facilities that contribute to community, first-year programs and advising, orientation programs, early alert/early intervention programs, and student support services and programs. Reasons for student departure, including poor academic achievement, desire for a program not available at the institution, and health, social and financial issues are also considered. Finally, this section provides a discussion of the role of institutional strategic goals pertaining to retention.

Programs, Policies, and Practices Influencing Student Persistence

    Student-institutional fit/aligning expectations with reality. When asked why their campus had strong first-to-second year retention rates, faculty and administrators on every campus spoke of the importance of enrolling students who best fit the campus. They strive to enroll students with a deep understanding of the institution and the academic preparation to be successful. They also spoke of the importance of students' understanding and acceptance of the level of work required of them and of the need to use student support services, as necessary, to be successful.

    Achieving a strong student-institution fit requires effort on both the part of the institution and on the part of the student. The institution must have recruitment policies and practices aimed at attracting students who are likely to enroll and succeed on every level, including academic, social, cultural and sometimes spiritual. Students must invest significant time prior to enrollment to learn the culture of the campus as deeply as

possible so that they understand what is offered and what is expected of them. This requires that they look beyond glossy publications and information-laden websites and really get to know students who will be their peers and faculty who will become their mentors. Professor Campbell, from Jay College, articulated the importance of the campus visit in the selection of a college:

> Some of it is just coming to visit. That visit is important to helping make a decision. … so they know what they are going to get into. They do an overnight. If they're an athlete or a musician, they go to practice, they go to a rehearsal, they talk with a faculty member, they go to class.

Many faculty and administrators cited the importance of the work of the institution, and particularly of the admission office, in identifying and enrolling students who best fit the culture of the campus. Not surprisingly, this theme was articulated most clearly by enrollment management officers. Each institution in this case study is selective and is able to admit students based on more than academic factors alone. Faculty and administrators articulated the importance of ensuring that students really understood the unique culture found on their campuses. Jay College offered a distinctive perspective in that they attract and enroll a large number of students who had numerous family members who had also attended Jay. Having a large number of legacies on campus means there are many students who have grown up learning about the college from relatives that attended and ensures a deeper knowledge of and enthusiasm for the campus community. Mr. Wilson, vice president for enrollment at Jay College, said

> What we find here is that there's a really good student-institutional fit. It's not uncommon to have five- and six-generation[s of Jay College students].

Professor Connor, of Jay College, also expressed the power of the legacy

connection and he illustrated the idea with an example of an alumnus who is planning

years in advance to send her children to Jay College:

> …but I did have an alum advisee, who came back to visit a couple of months ago. And she brought her two kids. And she said, 'Yeah, Joe and I have a 15-year mortgage, so when Linda becomes an 18-year old, we know we'll be able to pay the Jay tuition'. And they were planning on this already. She's an alum and her husband isn't. But when he's visited he said he really likes this place. Who knows how much it's going to cost for them to send their own kids here. But she's already decided. This was such a great place for her, she wants her daughter to have that same experience.

Ms. Jones, from student affairs, also spoke to how the legacy effect helps create a strong

sense of community at Jay:

> You know, I'm always struck by how many Jay students will say, 'It just felt right' and I'm sure that for admission people, that's maddening. How do you sell 'it just felt right' but I do think that there's something that self-selects about a whole lot of Jay [students]. Generations that feel [close to their college] and that fit make sense to them. There's something that speaks to them about the way people walk down the sidewalk and say 'hello' to each other whether they know each other or not, that there's this idea that there's a commitment to social justice, there's a commitment to community and to sense of responsibility to each other. I don't know how to measure those things I just know that they exist and they've existed for generations and I do think that there's a self-select that happens there.

Mr. Swanson of Turner College expressed the need to ensure that

communications to prospective students are consistent with the day-to-day experience

of students who attend. In their effort to achieve this level of accuracy and

transparency, they repeatedly check their recruitment messaging with enrolled students.

Mr. Swanson explained the importance of this process:

We try to be really, really honest with kids. We check our messages all the time with our tour guides. So, we use our group of 100 tour guides as a floating focus group and I'm always sitting down with small groups of them or we do two big workshops for all of our tour guides, big training sessions. As a part of that I've always said to them, 'OK, now you tell us. What should we be saying to prospective students about the Turner experience?' … We show them our admissions pieces before they go to press and we say, 'OK, here's the final design, do we have it right? React to these photos. React to these messages. Are we getting this right?' We're in constant touch with our students about the messages that we're broadcasting to the world because we don't want to setup cognitive dissonance when the new students arrive here. … I think when they get here what they find is we are who we said we were.

Ms. Smith, vice president for enrollment at Nile University, spoke of fit as a means to efficiency in the recruitment and enrollment process and articulated how finding students with the "best fit" contributes to both a smooth enrollment process and provides greater student retention:

Requiring all those pieces, we're trying to know the students who would have the fit, bring them to campus for a visit and that's absolutely what we're trying to work on and then aim our aid dollars at the students who feel like they would be a good match for the institution, but that's our job, and to make sure that they can handle the coursework once they get in the door.

Surprisingly, this theme was identified not just by enrollment officers. Academic and student affairs administrators as well as faculty contributed to this theme. Ms. Bailey, director of residential services at Turner College expressed it this way:

…part of it is I believe we're pretty honest about what we offer here. So I hope that when students come, they have a pretty good sense of what to expect here at Turner.

Similarly, Professor Brown of Jay College expressed the importance of students' gaining an authentic understanding of the institution prior to enrollment:

> On the one hand, you have to figure that its [strong retention] got something to do with our admissions process, that we manage to bring in students who know what they're getting into, and then find here what they thought they were going to find.

Professor Connor, a faculty member at Jay College, also applauded the work of

the admissions counselors and their professionalism, honesty and integrity in the

recruitment process. He offered this insight:

> It starts from our admission counselors. They are very deliberate in what type of students they are looking for. They are very honest about what kind of place this is. So they are essentially the gate keepers and the information providers for any prospective students and their families. That's one reason. They are very good at what they do. They do not promise things that are not going to be reality once people arrive.

Dr. Campbell, a professor at Jay College, spoke of the importance of fit in terms

of recruiting students who are academically prepared to meet the challenges of life at Jay.

He suggested that students persist, in part, because the college attracts strong students

with aspirations to be successful beyond the undergraduate level. As they succeed and

achieve their goals, the reputation of the college is strengthened, which then helps attract

strong future students. He spoke of this cycle as follows:

> …[the] quality of student who gets accepted at the college will reflect what's happened over the 30 years that I have been here. Probably in the 30 years, we've had 350 students that have gone to medical school. That's about right. Right now in the first two years they have 24 and 44 in the first two years of medical school. The school gains a reputation.

Mr. Swanson articulated the value of a holistic and sophisticated applicant review

process. He explained the empirical process used at Turner to determine "best fit":

> …one of the studies that we did in Admissions, and we had a faculty committee that worked with us on this, really aimed at trying to understand… Was the way we were grading a file consistent with

retaining Turner students? Were the things we value and were using to grade a file predicting not just academic success at Turner but also predicting likelihood of staying at Turner? And what we discovered was that, yes, they did. … The higher the admissions grade-out which was, kind of, a holistic grade-out but that weighted different things differently. The higher that end number was, the greater the likelihood that the student would graduate in four years, [would] remain at the institution. And there was actually a correlation between the way we graded a file and the GPA that student earned [at Turner]. And so, it really gave us a lot of confidence that the way we were managing the different elements that go into making up an application actually had validity in terms of predicting academic success [and also] of likelihood [of] staying at Turner. So, I think that's one part of it….

He added:

I also think that we're very, very thoughtful and we've tried to be very, very careful about how we evaluate applicants and how we go about doing what we're doing to invite [only] certain students to become part of our community.

Particular elements of the application process, as discussed by Mr. Swanson, also contribute to enrolling students most likely to persist. In particular, attracting a significant portion of the class through Early Decision helps build an enthusiasm for the college that contributes greatly to the positive community atmosphere found at Turner.

He said:

…part of that, and I think that without question has had an impact, is the impact of early decision and a decision to really make Early Decision, kind of, [a] signature part of what we do and to be very unapologetic about it, to be very, very public about it, to go out and promote it hard to a guidance counselor community that was suspicious initially and resistant initially. But also to try some things to make Early Decision a win for everybody…. Now, what those Early Decision kids bring with them to our campus is incredible enthusiasm for Turner. They've decided they love this place so they come with all of that energy, all of that enthusiasm, all that readiness to jump in with both feet and really engage. And they contribute to making this a really happy campus environment.

Thinking of this in terms of Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) model, student persistence (the output) depends on the combination of the unique student characteristics (inputs) and on the unique environment found on a given campus. Without referring to students as inputs, faculty and administrators interviewed in this study soundly articulated the need for enrolling students with characteristics and expectations that are consistent with the unique environment found on their campuses. They also clearly articulated important characteristics of the environment that are significant to student persistence on their campuses. On each of the three campuses in this study, the predominant theme offered by the environment was that of a strong culture of community.

Culture of community. The word *community* was the most frequently used word in faculty and administrators' discussions about student persistence. They described community in many ways, but the overall theme of a campus culture that is welcoming, personalized, engaging, and supportive was found on each of the three campuses. Mr. Wilson at Jay College put it simply:

> … it's a constellation of things that occur here that I think are different
> from other places. The over-arching one is the sense of campus
> community that people feel really good about.

A friendliness of the campus contributes to the sense of community and interviewees on several campuses spoke of the friendliness as both a reason that students enroll and as a reason they stay. Professor Nielsen of Nile University said:

> We pride ourselves on being friendly. This is another thing that students
> tell me when they come to visit; when they were here as a visiting high
> school student, that the campus was so friendly that they would be

walking with their tour guide…down some foot path and people are saying 'hello' and everybody seems to be on a first name basis so I think there's an attraction to that.

Mr. Swanson described a similar friendly and connected environment at Turner College:

… I value it very, very highly but this is a place where [there's an] incredibly strong sense of community. It's a place where students can connect with each other on [a] very deep level. It's a place where our students can connect with our faculty … at a very, very deep level and student/faculty relationships are intense and deeply felt. Students' relationships with other students are also intense and deeply felt. Students are encouraged to engage deeply here.

Jay College dean of students Ms. Jones also described a strong community atmosphere:

…there's a strong and long tradition of interpersonal connection, so I think that Jay has always been the kind of place where students engage one-on-one with their faculty and one-on-one with administrators and where people are intentional about caring for our students' success.

Members of each college community identified a very intentional process wherein faculty and staff get to know their new students. Learning names of incoming students as quickly as possible was mentioned several times. Professor Green offered this example of how he accomplishes this task at Turner:

It's a big thing with us. We take pictures. I don't know them a lot by their names so using their pictures keeps it face focused. When we use the pictures it's better to give us a face. I quiz a lot, so I know everybody's name by the third or fourth week. I call them out by first name and I think that is important.

Faculty and administrators at Nile University also value developing relationships that matter. Professor Nielsen spoke of faculty and staff showing students that they care as being central to students' positive adjustment to college:

I think it has to be consistent contact and developing relationships that matter. I really think that everything else is nice, you know, maybe it enhances like the student alert system, that enhances communication but if

students don't feel that they matter on our campus, if they don't feel that they are known and cared about by faculty and by staff they're not going to feel as engaged and as connected.

Mr. Swanson elaborated on how the sense of community is built at Turner and introduced the idea that a strong and intentional cohesiveness among faculty and staff is an essential element in creating the supportive and caring environment that helps students be successful:

So, there's going to be built [a] mutual sense of support, a willingness of people to collaborate with one another on the interest, on the part of kids, at being in a place where people are kind to each other. And that doesn't mean you don't challenge each other and engage in debate and all that stuff but it ought to be civil debate. And we ought to be able to disagree without throwing epithets with each other and those kinds of things. Creating the type of community atmosphere that permeates all corners of the campus is a huge but important task.

At Turner College, there was agreement that having senior management set a clear tone and expectation for faculty and staff was instrumental in achieving that goal. Professor Green described it this way:

[A former president] was in my mind a very good leader in the sense [that] he made the goals very clear. He made us care about our classes and it meant we cared about our students. It didn't mean we passed everybody. It meant that we were concerned about their welfare and their progress and so on. The [president and his wife] invited every student to their house, not just once but many times. The president would know people's names. It was amazing.

As Professor Green continued, it was clear that the president led by example to achieve this strong sense of community and that going "above and beyond" for students was the expectation.

And his message was very clear. This is [a college that] cares. If the students thought something had happened, he would listen to them. His

office was always open to a student. The day I interviewed here, a student came up and said, 'I want to talk to the president' and the secretary said 'Okay'. She didn't ask him why. She said 'When do you want to do that?' And she gave him a time. Students have priority. And they thrive very much here. We pick up students with all kinds of issues. One student was telling me one time that he had a problem at four o'clock in the morning and he was knocking on the President's door. [The president] came down in a bath robe and his wife came down and they all had tea.

The former president at Turner College was very intentional in creating an environment aimed at being especially attentive to students. The assistant dean for academic life, Dr. Spencer, provided this example of how the president encouraged faculty and staff to think their relationships with one another in order to best serve students:

> …the president made everybody go to these customer service meetings and read a book and the book was a lay-book and any one of us could have written the book if we'd been in service for a long time… [but] it reminded us all that serving each other is part of that customer service.

With service to other faculty and administrators comes recognition of their good work. Dr. Spencer explained the importance of that at Turner College:

> I think we're all so used to working beyond what's expected of us, there is an expectation here … But again if you reward people, if you appreciate them, if you recognize the importance of their work and what they do I think it sustains the rhythm.

The idea of customer service, a term not always appreciated on college campuses, was articulated repeatedly at Turner College. Dr. Spencer elaborated on the value of showing appreciation to other offices when they served students especially well:

> So I think there's always been appreciation for the value of all the offices. Every semester we take out an office that's been particularly helpful to our office at helping students and we send them a little chocolate gift or something to just let them know we really appreciate how they've made

our jobs easier here. So I guess customer service … is a big thing at Turner.

Several members of the Nile University community also expressed comments about the need for strong support from the top down. Ms. Smith articulated it most clearly when she said:

> [The president] has to say, and he has been very good about every time he stands up in front of people he says, 'Recruitment and retention are the oxygen for the institution. I need everybody to focus on that. Nothing else matters if you don't have students.' You got to have the support from the top or nothing happens.

On the Jay and Turner College campuses, there was a distinctive element of the environment identified by faculty and administrators. At a macro level, it has to do with a sense of community, but it went deeper than that. Each of these colleges is selective and each enrolls strongly prepared academic students. Contrary to what one might expect of selective colleges, each has very strong student support programs which students are encouraged to use as needed. The surprising element was that there was a certain freedom and lack of stigma attached to using student services. Faculty feel free to approach students and suggest use of support services and students are unusually receptive to that advice. Ms. Jones described how that works at Jay College:

> … in the ethos of the campus, in the very fabric of the institution, there is this inherent strong sense of community. I think that it's a place where people feel a sense of home and a sense of concern and caring for each other's well-being and I think that that translates into people feeling comfortable here even when they're challenged, even when they struggle academically. I think that because of the sense of community that exists, it's a place that's okay to ask others for help. It's a place where it's acceptable to reach out to each other and I think that there are lots of pieces that have been established for years that it's not seen as a negative thing that somebody might say to a student, 'You seem like you're

struggling and what can we do to get you on path with that and on target with that?'

This interactive and supportive environment was especially prevalent at Turner College, where faculty, administrators and students spoke about it. There seemed to be an openness about and acceptance of academic support services. Dr. Spencer, who oversees the student resource center, summed it up nicely:

> I think it's nice for students to understand that if they use the services, they can still end up in tutoring in the future; there's no stigma attached to that, which I think is important.

An important part of building community of these campuses was a very intentional effort to get students involved in varied and meaningful ways around campus. This involvement and engagement happened in and out of the classroom: in athletics, fine arts and in campus employment. Dr. Jones talked about the need for students to find a passion in their experience at Jay College and to engage deeply in that passion:

> I've always been impressed by the fact that Jay students seem to understand that if they're passionate about something, they should do something. Get involved, have a plan, and they'll effect change in a really meaningful way and I think that there's a lot of campuses that would talk about that idea, but not always really let students live that experience. I think that Jay has a long history of letting students live that experience of facilitating opportunities for them to take it and run.

Mr. McDonald at Nile University expressed a similar view on the importance of student engagement on campus, and particularly in the area of service to others:

> And engage service and since that is one of the three main pillars here at Nile, student leadership and service, it really introduces them to the ethic of service of the institution and it is another way for them to be out there with their peers interacting in a less formal setting and they are out doing something positive in the community representing the institution but they are also forming some different relationships.

Faculty and administrators provided several examples of meaningful ways that students are engaged in their experience at Jay College: Dean Brown spoke of engagement in the college choir, noting that being in the music program is a major commitment on the part of students:

> I was always amazed that the students who in addition to being history majors or whatever majors also were in the choir and the commitment that they made to that, or the orchestra or what have you. The kind of commitment that I had only associated with people who were involved in intercollegiate athletics.

A similar example was offered by Dr. Wilson at Jay as he noted the value of a liberal arts college and the importance of students developing diverse interests:

> Yes, the physics person, and then you have … and then they play the oboe. Or, you have an exercise physiology person and they play the baritone. Or, and so the diversity of opportunities, academically and socially, are huge.

The examples of varied student involvement at Jay College were articulated repeatedly. Professor Campbell expressed a certain sense of awe that students could not only be involved in various aspects of campus life, but that they could be strong contributors to various programs simultaneously:

> …he was a chem. major. He was a basketball player. Starting post and also played keyboard for the jazz band. So you see those kinds of combinations. The first chair for the orchestra is one of my advisees and she's working at the PA program. For about the last 12 years, eight of the last 12 years, the first chair in the orchestra has been a biology or biochemistry major and that person has either gone to medical school or plans to go to some health professional program. They have that mix of people and so the recruiting is done to get them involved in a musical ensemble and sometimes or athletics.

> Even study abroad was cited as a way to build student-faculty connections.

Professor Green at Turner College spoke at length about a study tour he takes with

students and the power of the relationships that are formed during that time away:

> [an international] University is one of our study abroad programs with a
> faculty member. But these groups, ours and Communications department,
> we send a faculty member and I teach a course there. But it is a wonderful
> experience and they rent us an apartment and we stay there for a semester.
> It's really over the top… I wrote [the students] a letter the next morning on
> how much I thought of them. I didn't say I love them but I do love them.
> That's the bonding that you get with the kids. I think a lot of that happens
> and that's a neat part of being part of this community. And I guess I hope
> it leads to retention. None of those students thought about leaving.

At Turner College, one administrator was especially proactive in getting students

connected after a strong first semester. Not only does Dr. Spencer take time to recognize

students who have done very well, she encourages them to be a tutor the following

semester:

> We also send congratulation's notes to the students who do really well.
> And say congratulations want to be a tutor?

Each of these campuses has high expectations for student performance and they

clearly articulate the challenges students will face. An interesting element identified by

faculty and administrators is the idea that students compete, not against each other but

against themselves, always striving to stretch themselves just a bit more. The unique part

of this is that the campus community views fellow students as supporters rather than

competitors in this pursuit. Mr. Swanson described how this works at Turner College:

> ...within a lot of the academic programs at Turner there's also an
> incredible sense of community and a sense of just shared experience and
> collaboration rather than competition. Our pre-med program, for example,
> on many campuses pre-med is, kind of, the cutthroat competitive program.
> And here it's much more common for students to form study groups and
> work together collaboratively toward the success of everybody in the
> study group.

A similar example was provided by Dr. Wilson about the Jay College experience:

> The culture here is extraordinarily positive. That, I think that plays an essential component in the well-being of the students. We do [a] conference every year. The opening guy who spoke was the Chief of Neurosurgery at [a large hospital]. He's a Jay graduate. He said, which really caught my attention, he said, 'You know, when you're at Jay, you compete with the material and not your fellow students.'

Mr. Jacobs at Nile University expressed a similar sentiment:

> It's not such a cutthroat environment where students are saying, 'I want to do well, but I hope you do not.' It's a supportive environment, from the top down, and I think the students get into that, and they feel like, 'Okay, we're here. We typically came with a B+ average, 1150 SAT or better. We can do the work here, and we're going to give it our best shot.'

It is also important that students feel they belong at Nile University. Mr. Jacobs added:

> Not everybody does from the beginning, but I feel like the students feel like they belong here. I don't get the sense that they feel like we take a lot of students who should not be here.

> People make the difference. Faculty and administrators on each campus talked

about the blend of faculty and staff and the intentionality with which they interact on

behalf of the community and for the success of their students. The idea is that faculty and

administrators who know each other and who have a strong understanding of each other's

roles are best able to help students. Professor Green provided an example of how

collaborating with a coach about a mutual student at Turner College helped move the

student in the right direction:

> There are a lot of athletes and a lot of sports. I know students play. My wife and I watch some of the sports. There is generally a good camaraderie between the faculty and the sports teams. The football coach, for example, he and I share a lot of students and if I am having trouble with one of his students, with one of the football players, I just call him and he just texts the student. He does it right away and if I say to him about that student that I am having a little difficulty with he will say, 'No,

I will talk to him'. He's a good man and wants to keep them on the straight and narrow. And I tell you, twenty minutes later, Coach says you want to talk to me. Problem solved. So things are generally pretty good. And I've always liked that.

A positive atmosphere on campus is important to the development of a healthy community. Professor Green continued,

…my view is really from the faculty. It is kind of a feeling like this is a family. If you work here, the atmosphere, it's obvious it's a family place, a very cordial place. If we want to say something to somebody, most of the time we don't use the email. We do sometimes but it is very common to just pick up and drop over. You call people and we talk to them; it's not adversarial. In fact, if you are adversarial, you would be shut off immediately. It is just not the way we do things.

Professor Anderson added another element to the idea of faculty and staff working together on a personal level. When referring a student to a particular resource, at Turner they prefer to make the connection with the office or person the student is to see rather than simply giving them a name and instructing the student to see this other person. She provided this example of how it works:

…one of the things as you're talking that I think about is the sense of community, in that I mean I can think of... recently with advising a student who in fact is one of those students who is slipping a little bit down the cracks and we started talking about extracurricular activities and he wasn't doing anything and wasn't sure what to do. While he was sitting in my office, I called the director of the Office for Civic Engagement… and spoke to her with him sitting in the office and said, 'Oh I've got this lovely student… I've got this student I'm going to send over. Are you going to be there?' She said, 'Yes'. I looked at him and said, 'She's waiting for you, go over and speak to her,' which I firmly believe that if you do that they go. If you just say, oh make an appointment, they don't [go]. We're a campus where we know each other well enough and there's enough communication that I can, if I have a student who comes in and is depressed, I'll call [the counselor] over in counseling and say, '[first name], I'm sending someone your way. Is there someone who can meet with this student right now?' Even beyond that, just the sense that people

know each other across different activities.

The availability of faculty emerged as another contributor to a strong community.

Having open doors, ample office hours, attending student and campus events, or simply

living nearby all add to the sense of community found on these campuses. Turner

College's Professor Anderson expressed it this way:

> When we got to that moment where I said to you we're really a
> community, you know things like that wax and wane, but I really think
> we're an environment that really feels like a community. A lot of the
> faculty live close by. The students, as I said, are very close-knit ... it makes
> people feel very comfortable. There's really a sense of community on
> campus.

Professor Green, who spoke at length about the tone set by the former president of

Turner College, added that faculty like working there and expressed the importance of

open doors around campus:

> I think we all truly like being here. I don't know anybody that would say
> they don't like being here. …the president would come back and you
> would just see it, he would say, 'Open your door'. He would repeat this
> over and over again until it no longer needed to be repeated. But that's
> really [the president's] legacy.

Nile University faculty are also intentional about providing programs and venues

for student-faculty interaction outside the classroom. Professor Nielsen explained how

that works:

> So I actually lived in – for three years I lived in one of the largest
> residence halls in the faculty apartment. That was quite a long time ago
> though so I haven't done that recently but I have colleagues who are
> currently living in faculty apartments. So I think one of the goals of
> having faculty in the faculty apartments is to encourage some out-of-
> classroom connections between faculty; it can be social, extracurricular,
> there's even been an interest, very recently I would say, in the past year or
> year and a half, to get faculty to do faculty program – faculty who are not
> living in the residence house to do like an evening faculty program in one

of residence halls. … There were little announcements at faculty meetings, there were brochures printed, there were requests for volunteers to propose a program, maybe an evening program or a weekend program for a small group of residents.

This sense of community is enhanced on each campus in part due to the location. As a function of being more rurally located, faculty and students at Jay College and Nile University tend to find opportunities and venues on campus for socializing and entertainment. Similarly, despite Turner College's proximity to a suburban area, faculty and students also tend to look on campus for gathering opportunities and places. Turner's Professor Anderson said:

There's not a really good coffee shop [near campus]. There's no place to go and hang. There are a couple of places, but they are not particularly good. There's a bar on the corner over there, but certainly that's problematic for various reasons… I actually wonder if one of the things that happens is because everybody is in one place, if they're together.

On college campuses with strong first-to-second year retention, personal connections are clearly valued, not because of an overarching strategic retention goal, but for how personal relationships contribute to the sense of community. The importance of community and of building personal relationships with students was clearly articulated on all three campuses but perhaps best articulated by Dean Brown at Jay College:

…they're focused on building the relationship with the student, not for the sake of retention but for the sake of building the relationship…But again it's thinking in terms of at that point more departmental and personal relationships than it is thinking institutionally.

Facilities that contribute to community. Facilities were not initially mentioned as faculty and administrators articulated programs, policies and practices important to student persistence. However, when asked if facilities play a role, there was consensus

that facilities do play a role in the recruitment and retention of students. In their study on

the impact of facilities on the recruitment and retention of students, Cain and Reynolds

(2006) found a strong positive relationship between facilities and student decisions about

enrollment and persistence. Additionally, they found physical spaces that contribute to

social interaction were among characteristics cited, particularly among women students.

According to faculty and administrators in my study, state-of-the-art buildings help

attract students to campus. Further, spaces within those facilities help draw enrolled

students into meaningful social and academic interaction. Location of offices on campus

can also contribute to positive outcomes. Mr. Swanson at Turner College referred to such

spaces as having an impact on the overall student experience:

> We want these facilities to be high impact … we want to build things
> that will be high impact for the student experience.

He expanded this theme by articulating how buildings can specifically impact the

kind of students attracted to a campus. Specifically, he spoke of being strategic about

constructing buildings that would attract strong, more academically-focused students who

tend to persist at higher levels.

> Turner has this long history, it has a very strong Science, Pre-Med School
> and … years ago we saw that we were starting to lose some of our top
> science, pre-med kids, maybe, you've heard this story from our science
> folks. We went to the Board and at that time the [student] union was
> actually on the drawing board for refurbishment and addition before the
> science facilities and we said to the Board, 'Look, we're losing science
> kids. They're walking into our science facilities, they look old, they look
> kind of beat up, they just don't look fresh and contemporary.' The Board
> flipped the priorities and built the new science building first … [and we]
> went back to being a place that was winning the battles for our top science
> kids again.

Mr. Jacobs also commented on ways the physical layout of the campus supports a

sense of community at Nile University:

> …just to have that type of culture, I think, really helps students feel like
> they're connected here. I guess, the layout of the campus, the fact that it's
> easy to get from classrooms, to residence halls, to the fields or to your
> activities. I just think there is some type of synergy between the way the
> campus is laid out, the way the faculty and students interact.

Faculty and administrators noted that colleges should be mindful of the facilities

they provide because of high student expectations for contemporary and varied academic

and living spaces. Mr. Swanson added:

> In the last 10 years we've built six new residence halls all apartment style
> so, really the kind of living that this contemporary student wants. That's
> been very, very helpful as well.

Professor Mura expressed the student desire for varied kinds of student spaces at

Nile University:

> I think students crave more spaces on campus that – where they can either
> work in groups and talk or they can work quietly and not be interrupted
> especially at the crunch times of the semester.

Mr. Jacobs commented on the importance of the physical plant at Nile University,

stating that the attractiveness, the way it is laid out and the overall feel conveys a certain

expectation for behavior of students. He stated:

> I've heard students say that, that because the campus is attractive, that the
> buildings are well maintained, that they take more pride in the campus,
> and then in their work here. I've heard students talk about that in focus
> groups, where they've said that, because of our campus and what we've
> got, that they want to be a stronger part of it by challenging themselves
> while they're here, and trying to do the best work they can.

In the construction and renovation of academic and residential buildings, faculty

and administrators on each campus articulated the benefit of intentionally designing

informal spaces where students, and sometimes faculty and staff, can gather. The consensus was that these spaces contribute to the sense of community on campus. Mr. McDonald articulated this priority at Nile University:

> It seems like every summer we are buying, building or renovating, or oftentimes all three or two of those. We have brand new residence halls or practically brand new residence halls over here and then we just purchased some new housing … I think we continue to make sure that we have, whether it's housing, academic buildings, or new science building, the kind of facilities that will compete with most other campuses if not all other campuses that are in any stage, you know whether they've been there for 200 years or whether they are new up-and-coming or they have a lot of new infrastructure being put in place. I think that we maintain a look and feel on the outside, but then on the inside they are still (up to date).

Dean of Students, Dr. Jones, offered a unique perspective that when students live and learn in desirable and attractive spaces, it can have a positive effect on their behavior:

> We want our residence halls to look nice, not just because you want your students to live in an environment that is clean and well-maintained but also because clean and well- maintained equals students who are respectful of their environment. …So it breeds a nice environment breeds great care and concern about environments, so I think that Jay has figured that out a long time ago. … We build, like the building out back, the new academic building that came online this past year. That's a great example of environment directed to student need. There are these phenomenal little lounges in the corner, in all the corners, that are kind of connected to the academic faculty that are in that area, but also just a great spot to go and study and the nooks, the crannies, the lounge furniture, there's a group of architects that are working on a renovation, some renovation plans for two other buildings on campus and it's really fun to sit in those conversations and hear people talk about how important those student gathering spaces are.

All three colleges have recently built or renovated significant buildings on campus. Turner College and Nile University recently opened new science facilities. Jay College and Turner College recently renovated their campus/student centers. Faculty and

administrators on each campus spoke of the intentionality of creating spaces in those

buildings designed to encourage interaction among students and faculty. At Jay College

the hallways in the student center were furnished with pods of chairs, benches and

informal gathering spaces. Dr. Anderson, at Turner College, expressed her enthusiasm

about the science center spaces:

> One of the things about that space that's really nice is it was very
> intentional and it was intentional both in terms of student usage and
> faculty usage and also environmentally very, very intentional. It's got
> wonderful, wonderful meeting and hanging out spaces for students.

Dean Brown at Jay College provided a similar comment about the importance of

informal gathering spaces:

> Lots of choices, lots of seating areas, some TV monitors to play some
> messages and calendar of events and stuff like that. And I think that's
> been important…I think that if you look around you will find small places
> where there is comfortable furniture. It's just nothing bigger than this, but
> I'm thinking in that building when you go downstairs and head towards
> the post offices and to the right is … our bookstore. But to the immediate
> right is something about the size of my office with sofas and chairs and
> all.

In addition to gathering spaces within the academic buildings, Nile University

was very intentional about well-designed learning spaces within their new science

facility. Dean Mann described the objective:

> The new science building is a really good example of planning a facility
> [with] some [interactive] instruction. Our science faculty have really
> embraced the sort of studio concept in teaching science. The hallmark of
> this approach is you have a fairly large space with some tables where
> students can do some learning from lecture or demonstration, but then also
> the lab benches are right behind. They can do something at the tables,
> whether it is individual work or group work, and then prepare [for] the
> laboratory to actually do some hands-on stuff, get finished, get back to the
> tables and do some data analysis right [away]. This building was really

designed well. It was very intentional.

Ms. Spencer at Turner College agreed that the amenities within the facilities can

also make a difference to students and may facilitate their learning process.

> This not so much it's like a little basement but they've got three white
> boards where they can hash out anything they want, we always have white
> board markers because every Friday work study has to check that they're
> all fresh. And all those rooms have white board markers and all of them
> have computer ports. So I think that helps. They want us to put a coffee
> bar in here…

Providing choices in living arrangements was also viewed as a benefit. Colleges

provide both older and new residence halls, single rooms, double rooms, suites,

apartments, villages, and in the case of Turner College, houses in residential areas

contiguous to the campus. In addition to varied choices, Dr. Wilson, academic dean at

Turner College, addressed the benefit of providing the 'whole' experience to students:

> [I] think we have some really fine residence halls. I think where a person
> lives makes a huge difference. Some students like the charm of the older
> dorm like [Smith], and some like the feeling and the living arrangements
> in suites of the new [hall] or [residential] village. So I think, in fact I
> know, that the college has made a really strong effort to build enough
> campus housing so that students are on campus. There are probably 95%
> on campus in campus housing. So I think the quality where they live is
> good. The college has been excruciatingly careful about the quality of
> food service and when we did the renovations to the student union that
> whole great room, the dining common…

Ultimately, academic, residential and social facilities seem to play a role in how

students feel about their campus overall. Dean Mann, from Nile University, suggests that

translates into a loyalty to the campus.

> I think it is a combination of living facilities, recreation facilities and
> learning facilities that affect a student's thinking about the place that they
> are. Are our facilities driving a sense of, in marketing terminology, brand

loyalty? Am I proud when I bring my parents or my boyfriend to look?

First-year programs and advising. Programs and policies designed specifically

to help new first-year students transition to college were identified as meaningful to

student persistence. Faculty and administrators on every campus spoke of the existence of

such programs and policies and offered details about what makes such programs

successful. Nile University, for example, has an entire office dedicated to the first-year

experience. Ms. Thomas spoke of the holistic approach at Nile University:

> …in our first year we dedicate a lot of attention to our first year students,
> from their entrance throughout their entire first year. I think having an
> office dedicated to the first year experience is an important one.

Turner College's approach is more informal. Rather than having a specific office

dedicated to first-year students, they have an integrated approach that is effective in

helping students through their first year. Professor Albert describes the college's

program:

> We get about three or four weeks into the semester, we get an official
> email from the Registrar's office just to check in about who's coming to
> classes and who's not, to make sure that our lists and students mesh.
> There's not a formal structure, but there are a lot of things that come very
> close to formal in reminding us that there's a responsibility for that.

Seminar courses designed specifically for first-year students were mentioned at all

three colleges. Meaningful characteristics of those programs included having the

professor of the class as advisor, small class size and the benefits of having freshmen-

only classes. Professor Green described the seminars, advising, and close student-faculty

relationships at Turner College:

…close faculty contact with the student. And it starts early with the first-year seminars where we group the students into small groups and they get to know the faculty members very well. We spend a lot of time advising. I have fifteen students in my class and I advise them through the first year.

Dean Brown immediately identified the first-year program as a primary reason for student success at Jay College. As was described by faculty and administrators on all three campuses, the first-year seminar course links students with similar interests and introduces them to the campus culture and resources in addition to a specific academic area.

I think our first-term seminar program has got to be responsible for part of this. The fact that students have this program, have this course that introduces them to the life of the college, to the intellectual life, and people coming from many, many different disciplines, many different departments to offer these….that those individuals become the advisors for the first-year students, I think, is very important, because there we've linked academic advising with someone you're taking a course from…

Student advising at Nile University is very clearly defined. In fact, several members of the faculty and administration mentioned the existence of written expectations for faculty advisors and for students. Dean Mann identified this as a reason for student success at Nile University:

There are two documents. One that articulates expectations for advisees and another that articulates expectations for advisors.

Professor Nielsen, a Nile University faculty member in the first-year seminar and advisor, described the expectations in greater detail:

What's interesting is – okay so this is what you should ask for; there's a handout that talks about the responsibilities of the advisor. There's another handout that talks about the responsibilities of the advisee for the student. So it assumes that if you are a student here that you don't just sit back and have the advisor do all of your – all of the work … Because the

expectation is as a student who is being advised, you as an advisee have some responsibilities. For instance when you meet with your advisor to select courses one of your responsibilities is to go on line and check your degree audit which identifies for you the core curriculum courses or we call it central curriculum now; what has been fulfilled by you, but remains to be fulfilled so you are informed and aware of like what classes you need instead of coming to your advisor and saying, 'What do I need to take?'.

Nile University has been intentional in its quest to set clear expectations in the first year. Ms. Smith illustrated the importance of helping students understand what it will take for them to complete their Nile degree in four years.

We used to have some very fine programmatic maps that are considered the best practice where you can map it out for students over four years, give them a sample program. Tell them, "This is what it's going to take. This is how many hours you have to take every year, and this is..." We don't put them in New York and say, "You're in California and we're not going to tell you how to get there. We're not going to give you a map." It's the same thing. They're really driving and watching the hood ornament instead of the road.

Dean Brown discussed the first-year program at Jay College and elaborated on the information that professor/advisors receive about some students in order to know and help the students be as successful as possible:

The first thing that came to mind was this first term seminar program. But I would also point out things like well the advising center and I'm sure this doesn't distinguish us from other schools but in terms of feeding into this the advising center particularly with its support services for students with [documented] disabilities. In the last six or eight years of my teaching, maybe a little longer I would receive at the beginning of every semester notes, confidential letters from the disability services pointing out the situation for particular students and asking me to cooperate with that student which I think all of us do generally.

Several faculty and administrators indicated that great care is taken to hire and train those who work with students in the first-year program. Dean Murphy spoke of the importance of hiring faculty who bring varied talents but who clearly put being an

effective teacher of undergraduates at the center of their academic life at Turner College:

> I interview all the candidates for teaching positions, as does the provost, and we are looking for somebody first and foremost who can teach. Absolutely, they should also have a very rich scholarly life, but they are about being effective teachers. It is not easy work. I think it is harder than ever to teach to very diverse learners.
>
> Dean Brown, who had been a long-time faculty member at Jay College prior to

moving to the administration, offered this about training first-term instructor/advisors:

> …you can only teach a [first-term seminar] if you have gone through a week or two with training in the summer and we compensate people for going to that. I think it is a weeklong training session that is devoted to the first term seminar, and only then when you're vetted by that process can you offer an [first-term seminar].

That high level of care is continued beyond the first year in the faculty review process.

Jay's Dean Brown added:

> …to make sure that our faculty are good at teaching, that they enjoy teaching. And obviously that's always key whether it's a first term seminar or any other class that if the professors show a real commitment and all. This year in this office I've had the opportunity to look at a number of reviews. We do a lot of reviews for our faculty. The first year review is a three person report that's written up and I read and meet with the professor that first year. The third year we actually bring in an outside reviewer and that person writes a report and I get to read that and the report from the committee that incorporates that outside review. …Yeah, it really is and even though I've been a long time faculty member I really did not until I came into this office this year, I really did not grasp how fully we provide these reviews and how beneficial they can be in correcting any deficiencies or just making sure that the person understands what we're looking for at this place. My point is as I read through these reviews I oftentimes see the comments that students make about the enthusiasm, about the commitment, about the passion for it and much overused but still an important word, the passion for the subject that the professor show in the classroom.

One benefit of a first-year seminar with professor as advisor is the regularity with which the advisor/professor interacts with new student advisees. This allows faculty to get to know their students quickly and to see them in a holistic manner. As challenges arise in the student's experience, faculty advisors are in a position to notice – and address – it right away. At Turner College where freshmen in first-year seminars create a cohort with their professor as advisor, the program begins during orientation. Professor Anderson of Turner College articulated the advantages of such a program

> …what it means is you are seeing the students two or three times a week, so there's regular contact. If someone's not showing up, you know they're not showing up. If someone is clearly depressed, you see that they are depressed. If someone's left out by the group, you get a sense of that.

Another benefit of the all-freshmen seminars is that students feel more freedom to ask questions because it is highly likely that other students may have the same question. This makes the environment safer and less judgmental than if upper class students were present. Professor Connor at Jay College elaborated on this:

> …where there are only freshmen and they could ask those questions. How do I choose a major? If you ask that in Econ 101, you'll get, "Oh I can't answer that. You have to do the supply and demand cards." You'll hear snickers; you'll see eye rolls or something. But in an FTS, a student asks that question and all of a sudden other students perk up, as in "I was wondering that too, how do I declare a major?"

The benefit of having first-year students together was also articulated at Nile University where first-year students are also housed together in residence halls where the only upper class students are resident advisors. Mr. McDonald, director of residence life, addressed this benefit:

We house our students together, first year [students] so they're able to form a cohort with many of their peers that are in their class as possible before they spread out and they are all over campus with members of all of the other classes.

Mr. McDonald, with a special focus on residence life at Nile University, articulated further benefits of helping first-year students develop their strongest ties with first-year peers:

The more folks they get to know in that first year that are in their class instead of students who make friends with juniors and seniors as freshmen and then two years later those folks are gone. They are friends with a senior and one year later that person is gone. If they make these extremely meaningful connections with those students who are already going to be there for their full time, I think that can have varying degrees (of success, of enhanced community) in further years.

Finally, the idea was raised that it is important for advisors to approach students with a long-term, four year view. This approach assumes that the student will be there for four years until graduation and creates a positive mindset based on that assumption. Professor Green serves as a first-year advisor who understands the value of this mindset:

Now, I haven't thought about this but we really from the beginning we say, we assume, they are going to be here all four years. And most of our students graduate in four years, so we can plan very well for them to have a four-year curriculum… It is a very close and personal connection with students who come. They know everybody and they can build a connection to the college even before people come here. And I think it's this close contact but that doesn't presume that you are going to go somewhere else. You are advising the students who come here. And I always volunteer for that. And each student receives thoughts from a faculty member and we will talk about their schedule for the next year or I will talk about their schedule for longer than a year so retention is kind of assumed.

Orientation programs. Pre-orientation and orientation programs were viewed on all three campuses as instrumental in facilitating a smooth transition to college. Both

Turner College and Nile University ask students to attend summer orientation programs

prior to their enrollment in the fall. At Turner College, pre-orientation programs are

facilitated by faculty to ensure that students begin making meaningful connections with

professors and they take place in various locations so that students learn the area.

Professor Albert explained it this way:

> We have pre-orientation programs, which I think are a wonderful
> opportunity where students will do something like, I think one of our
> biology professors takes students camping for a week. I know that there
> have been activities in [large city within a couple of hours of campus] for
> instance. There are a couple of programs that introduce kids to [the local
> area].

Similarly, the summer preview program at Nile University is designed to help

incoming students learn the campus culture. They interact with faculty, administrators

and both incoming and upper class students; they learn the resources available to them;

and they begin to understand what is expected of them. Ms. Thomas offered this

description:

> …summer preview programs. They are one day events in which we invite
> entering students with their families to participate. Again it is designed to
> be a preview of what they can anticipate that Nile has in store for them.
> We engage them both with the introduction to the academic program, but
> then we also introduce them to resources and services that will be
> available to them. They also then have an opportunity to interact with the
> other students who are coming and under their same major or school or
> department. They also have the opportunity to interact with our dedicated
> student leaders who are our crew leaders who are upper class students who
> have successfully made it [through] that first-year transition. Again, they
> work directly with them. I tell them the secret ingredient to the success of
> the program is the students truly get to benefit from their wisdom. Our
> students are with them at every point of the day and so they are in a way
> inculcating them into the culture of the campus while instilling in them
> their experiences that has Nile their school of choice.

The importance in upper class student participation in orientation programs is also valued at Jay College where selected upper class students interact with first-year students throughout orientation and well into the first semester. Dr. Jones, dean of students, described the college's beneficial program as:

> Our orientation program, I think, is phenomenally thoughtful about how we make sure that in those first critical weeks, we're paying attention to individual students from the way our [upper class student] program is set up to how that continues not just in the first days of orientation but then on into that first semester. I think that the fact that we hold on really tightly to our [residential advisor] program in the residence halls and how do we make sure that we have lots of folks that are engaging with students in the floor community that they live in.

Turner College holds a similar philosophy in providing first-year student housing and the value of student leaders in the transition of new students to the campus. Ms. Bailey further suggests that the physical layout of the campus can strengthen community on campus:

> I also think that in the residence halls, the college has chosen to house all the first-year students in three buildings, and they are also geographically pretty close. This building, [one residence hall] just behind us and [another hall], so they're not only living with their peers, but they're living in close proximity, so that if they want to visit, study, whatever, it's pretty convenient for them to get from building to building. That also helps for our training, so that the RA within these buildings can work on first-year issues, transitions, those kinds of things. So they're hopefully better equipped to help students through some of the stuff that happens when they come in as a first-year student, and then the last two years, our assistant director, who works with the first-year students, she started having the RAs do individual one-on-ones with residents, so that twice a semester, every student has at least 20 minutes to half an hour time just with their RA to talk about what's going on and see how things are going.

Ms. Smith, who recently led a campus-wide effort at Nile University to better understand student departure, identified an area within the orientation program that needs

to be addressed because the current practice of linking students with faculty from

potential majors, could in fact have an adverse effect on students who do not yet know

what they want to major in.

> …67% [retention] if you don't have a department when you walk in the door. Many of our strategies for advising [center on] advising the unknown major. [The president] was just really taken with this as was [the provost]*,* because this is four years. This isn't just one-year data. This is four years' worth of data. The problem starts when they walk in the door. During our welcome week, students go off with their departments during their orientation in the department, student picnics or this or that. That's it. They had no department.

This raised another aspect of what campuses can do in the name of continuous

improvement. Colleges implement programs, policies and practices to benefit their

students, but on-going assessment of those programs, policies, and practices is important.

Dean Murphy articulated how this cycle works at Turner College:

> I think knowing the "why" as well as the "what" is important. Why are we doing this? Is this effective? Let's take a look at this again. Every time we do programs, every time we do first-year seminars, student advising, or whatever it is "is this effective and what information do we have to let us know that it is effective." I think ARC is particularly good at that, the Academic Resource Center. They are evaluating and assessing constantly.

A strong sense of connection between faculty and administrators is an important

element in an overall positive campus sense of community. Turner College, for example,

is very intentional about training faculty and staff so that they can provide a coherent

support for students. Mr. Mann, dean of the college at Nile University, spoke of the

importance of clear expectations:

> ...that it is terribly important to have faculty and staff all on the same page, going in the same direction. The leadership mandates have to be very

clear. Expectations have to be clear.

At Turner College, Dr. Spencer, director of residential services, also articulated the importance of strong communication among faculty and staff so that they are united in presenting the college and in working with students. Dr. Spencer said:

> I work with all of those offices. Susan calls me when she has a kid she's worried about. [The dean of enrollment] and I go out to lunch once in a while to talk about, I need to know what the trends are, what the language is that I need to use, what he wants me to say, what he doesn't want me to say… we all work together.

Creating a positive environment that fosters community is seen as a contribution to the students and to the institution. Dean Mann at Nile University put it simply, "It is not just about me doing my job. It's about me doing the institution's job."

Early alert/early intervention system. Faculty and administrators at all three colleges identified the need for programs and policies designed to help in the early identification of first-year students who show signs of not adjusting well to college life. Professor Anderson, for example, described how faculty at Turner College submit midterm grades for all freshmen so that students were aware of their progress and so that faculty and staff could step in when necessary. Dean Mann described how faculty at Nile University are asked to be extra-attentive at the beginning of the year in identifying student*s who are not keeping up with their work so that the appropriate people can take action to provide help to students who need it:

> Instructors, we made a special plea at the beginning of the fall semester for folks to be… "extra attentive" isn't the right word, because they are always nervous that students aren't coming in and doing their assignments, but to be a little more aggressive about referring students to what we call the student support network…. make better use of the

resources in the residence halls, the RAs, to be folks who can communicate with students.

The first task in an early alert system is to know what to watch for. Dean Mann explained how Nile University seeks to identify students who show one or more signs that they are off track and need to be contacted. His example illustrates the power of sharing data among various offices around campus:

> We're trying to figure out what the alert triggers might be. Like I said, one obvious trigger is a transcript request. I think typically that comes too late. In fact, when you came in I was just sending an e-mail to somebody. I was looking at some data, sort of three lists that a student should be on at this point, a first year student ready to transition to second year. They should have selected their classes for the fall. They should have a housing contract. If they are a financial aid applicant, that application should be complete. I was looking at the list of students who had one or more hits. They are missing from at least one, if not two, or even three of those lists.

While information early in the first or second semester is useful and may allow an institution to take early action with a student, sometimes a clearer picture is not available until the end of the student's first year. Ms. Smith described the net used at Nile University toward the end of the first year:

> If the students came to Nile and persisted to their second year, their third semester, if they hadn't done what they needed to do in their first year in terms of achieving a certain GPA that we discover and a certain number of courses in their first year, even if they came back from that third semester, they were at a significantly higher risk of not making it to graduation. We call that our performance variable. … We get to the end of the freshman year and a certain number of students are always going to be under a 2.0. They get caught in the net, right? They get caught in academic, whatever. But then you have those students who … also drop a course each semester. Instead of having what we think is the minimum they need to have in order to hit the four-year plan, 26 credits after the first year and a 2.5 GPA, then, … What are we doing by not guiding students at the end of their freshman year to say, 'You're not on track and it's likely that you're not going to graduate unless you (a) take classes; (b) let's review what

academic program you're in, are you in the right program?' But there has
to be intervention in year one.

Nile University has been especially intentional about catching students as early as

possible. Professor Mura described how faculty and others on campus can easily send a

signal so that someone follows up with each student who is flagged:

> Okay so there's a link there [on the college website] where you can pull up
> an automatic form that goes directly to the Dean's office and it's for
> students who you are – you want to raise like a red flag because you feel
> as if this student is exhibiting behavior at risk. And I'm not talking just
> about say emotional behavior because there are other channels in place. If
> you think of a student that has emotional issues or depression or suicidal
> or whatever, there are certain channels in place to sort of direct the student
> to counseling services [immediately]. But this is more academic red flags
> and it's very easy; you click on this link, it brings up this template, you
> type in as a teacher what you see as at-risk behavior. If it's absenteeism,
> coming to class but not being prepared, coming to class falling asleep,
> disengaged, not handing in homework; whatever and you can do this at
> any point in the semester. This is a new initiative; I think it just has been
> in place a year. It has been very effective.

According to Dr. Finch, there is also similar training and a similar process to flag

students through the residence life staff. Alerts sent from student affairs feed into the

student support network. Creating a campus-wide web wherein early alert student

information can be shared and combined is also found at Jay College. Perhaps the need

has grown, as Dean Brown articulated, because student behavior can be destructive to self

and to others in the community:

> I had another thing down which doesn't impact a lot of students. It's only
> something I've become aware of this year when I'm serving this office.
> And it connects this office with our Dean of Students office and most of
> this is located in there. So if you're speaking to someone from Dean of
> Students Office, the issue of students of concern, trying to bring together a
> group of people who become aware of individuals who are having all
> kinds of issues. Brenda, it never crossed my mind that there would be

people who mutilate themselves or have stalking issues with former girlfriends or boyfriends, or eating disorders and all those things. And it shows, I think, how compartmentalized I think it was and my experience was. I'd walk into the classroom and I would teach, I might get to know these people a little bit outside of class and have friendships with them,— Things I would never have guessed at all. And I think that it can provide a kind of early warning system, which again factors into retention at some level I think here, there again that we're paying attention to things that we might think about disability services that our awareness has so increased which I think helps us help students and when we help students they feel more comfortable. They recognize that they're in an environment where someone cares about what's happening to them.

Turner College also illustrated how early identification and intervention work to help students in the early days of college. Dean Murphy offered this description of Turner's holistic approach:

If a student has not shown up let's say for a week, or if there is some frustrating behavior or if for any reason a faculty member isn't feeling right about a student, typically that faculty member will alert my office, and then my office will send out an inquiry. It will say, 'Concerns have arisen in the path X, Y, Z. Please let me know and the adviser knows about attendance, timeliness and quality of assignments and any other information that might be of help.' We send that out to the instructors, copy the adviser, but we also send out to residential services because they see, we are looking for a holistic approach, and the academic resource center. Then we get some information back and are able to put some things together to see what makes sense, and now with Internet and everything, I will also send students notes directly inviting them to come in, making sure that they are okay and so forth. So, often it is from faculty members. Perhaps, on occasion it will be from a parent. On some occasions residential life will have concerns about a student, and so I will make the same inquiry but make sure residence life gets the information.

Student support services and programs. Each campus provides strong programs and varied services for students aimed at enhancing student success. According to long-time faculty and administrators, such programs have emerged and evolved over the years in accordance with emerging student needs and expectations.

Student support programs on these three campuses include academic support such as

tutoring, disability services, writing assistance, and personal support such as counseling.

Jay and Turner Colleges have been intentional in centrally locating their

advising/student resource centers on campus. This helps raise awareness and visibility of

the services and contributes to the idea that using those services is both expected of and

encouraged for students.   Resources provided on each campus include academic, social,

and personal support programs. Ms. Bailey cited this as a reason for strong retention at

Turner College:

> I'm very aware of the fact that this college provides the resources for any
> student who needs any kind of support whether it's for social issues or
> academic issues and I believe that the academic resource center has always
> had a big role in the retention rate.

Academic resource services might be assumed to be directed toward weaker

students or students with learning disabilities. While their use is certainly encouraged by

students who struggle academically, at Turner College even high achieving students are

encouraged to use academic resources, with the idea that every student can achieve at a

higher level with appropriate resources. Dr. Spencer provided an illustrative example:

> We draw in a lot of students who believe they're going to go to medical
> school, and/or professional schools, they tend to be very ambitious
> students and sometimes anxious, most of the time anxious, more anxious
> than a student who's not competing for an A. So a lot of those students
> request tutoring in their first year to make sure that they get those high
> grades that they need to go where they eventually want to go. So the
> average GPA for a student, who is getting tutored here, any given year,
> falls around a 3.2. Since most of these students, in the first year, who have
> hit the ground and they're not cantering but they're walking easily; after
> they've been tutored in that first semester they realize how important
> tutors are to another student who's trying to get a better grade and they
> like the relationship that's happened and so they want to have that same

feeling that their tutor had and they want to be able to help the next person come in.

Each campus uses some form of a campus-wide care team to help students stay on the path toward graduation. They share information in order to identify individual students and emerging student issues so that they can intervene appropriately. Mr. McDonald, at Nile University, offered this description:

> The group is convened by our vice president of student life. [The associate dean of student life] is there, I am there, our director of the center for academic achievement, counseling center, director of disability services, my assistant director of community development who oversees all of the RA (student staff) in residence because there are a lot issues that emerge in the residence halls and there is a lot of opportunity for intervention there as well.

Support services on these campuses tend to be highly personalized where care is taken to know students well beyond the documentation received formally through the enrollment process. At Turner College, a team of administrators takes great care to find out more about what motivates incoming students so that the advising process is all the more effective. Dr. Spencer described this process:

> We have a] highly personalized pre-advising. So every June we, my learning specialists and I, meet with an average of 85 incoming kids out of a class of 580 or so. And usually they have sent us information that helps us with that advising session but if we don't we have a questionnaire we ask them, what did you love in high school, what did you hate, who was your favorite teacher, how much of it was content, how much of it was the teacher? We try to get to know them a little bit before they go off for their 15 minutes with their advisor to pick courses. And we send them to the advisor with a sheet of information.

Dr. Cole also commented on how Turner College deals with students with learning disabilities and their desire to identify those students as early as possible so that

they can be encouraged to use academic resources from the very beginning of their time

at Turner:

> So we let admissions decide who those kids are and we follow those kids
> and we have not seen any serious problems with those kids in the first
> semester. The kids who don't disclose until September or October are the
> kids that we really struggle with…

Professor Connor also commented on the benefits of a highly personalized

approach to students. She described how faculty know students beyond their academic

life and how faculty strive to understand how what is going on in the student's life

impacts their academic performance. The following is an excerpt of her comments about

the care Jay College takes in reviewing students who find themselves in poor academic

standing:

> We know that Nancy's mother had cancer, and she learned about it in the
> sixth week of class and we advised her to drop the classes. But she just
> couldn't imagine doing it, because she has invested so much, she loved the
> classes, you know, … Would they take such care in these other places?
> I'm not trying to in anyway denigrate what they do, but I don't know if
> they would. …I'm not sure if they can either.   And we sit there for three
> hours and we go through each of these cases and we say, it depends on the
> semester, we say here's the student, they are facing a withdraw because of
> this. And this person is a second consecutive semester of academic
> probation. What should we do with this case? And we talk about this. …
> And we even give students their right to come in and appeal the decision.
> And that's the second meeting of the semester. And they come in and we
> meet with each of those students for up to half an hour. And then we have
> the deliberation for a while, and we decide... It is really a labor intensive,
> but very student focused, approach. The student as the human being.

A similar individualized approach is taken by Nile University. Mr. Jacobs

described how some students are flagged during the admission process and are required

to participate in a first- semester program designed to help students get off to a well-

balanced start:

> That means setting up a weekly, hour-long meeting to meet with one of the tutors and talk about how they're doing in the classroom, working on any type of papers that would need to be checked out, going over any math issues that they would have, any foreign language issues, but having a regular touch with the members of that office, at least through the first semester.

Administrators at Turner College and Nile University expressed the importance of a sense of playfulness in their approach to their academic resource centers. This light-hearted approach helps students feel comfortable about using the resources and makes the centers a more desirable place to be. Dr. Spencer described this approach at Turner College:

> … that's another thing that helps retention because that's 90 kids out of the class that comes in. You can see we're a friendly place; we just won an award from the president. Our tutors and our learning systems won the president's award so we're celebrating and we have cookies out there; anybody gets a cookie, not just the tutors because they're celebrating with us. We tend to be a really playful student-focused, even though we're old ladies now, center…. so I expect everybody here to be really patient but to help the student move forward, so we want to see change over time. … I think other people criticize us as a little more tolerant and maybe enabling but our goal is very developmental, we really give first year students a lot of slack.

Mr. Jacobs illustrated a similar example at Nile University:

> They did have a few social events where they would have every student in the Academic Advancement Program get together for a pizza party or for a welcome at the beginning of the year. They tried to de-stigmatize the program, but there still were students that thought, "What is this? Does this mean I'm not a full-fledged student," if you will.

Although the academic resource centers on these campuses are by design visible and attractive places to be, there is also an intentional outreach component of connecting

students with helpful services. Dr. Spencer described one of the ways this works at

Turner College:

> So I think they do a lot of things in the dorms that really help them. We do study skill seminars for the first year students who are athletes and the coach asks us to do them, so we do the football team, the lacrosse team and the men's soccer team in the fall and we have athlete tutors who are a little older than they are and a female student as well; they pay closer attention if she's with them and we run workshops where there's maybe 15 or 20 minutes of, here's what's important for you to know and then the next 20 minutes is let's just talk; I'll tell you about my first year. I know that helps students relax a little bit because they hear from a peer who also plays in a sport, how he managed his time and what he did to discipline himself in that first year.

Staff at Nile University and Turner College spoke at length about the need for

strong partnership with parents. Mr. Jacobs, who has worked at Nile University for

nearly three decades, reflected that parents are increasingly involved, not just in the

college selection process, but also in the daily lives of students. In his opinion, this is

largely a result of technology and the ease with which students and parents can connect

about the little things throughout the day. Mr. Thomas articulated the benefit of setting

the expectation for student and parent involvement early in the process to let them know

that student success at Nile University is enhanced by this partnership:

> I think one of the things that we strive for here is communicating to families that we see them as partners in their student's success and that extends from there, … and how it's communicated through all of management through their orientation process into the first year. I think that translates further into the sophomore year and that they understand that there is a base of support for their success. It is communicated through them that it is a goal and aspiration for them and that it is expected that both the students work toward that end and we help support them to get there up front.

Faculty and administrators on two campuses identified the importance of peer

mentoring relationships in residence as well as academic settings. Among the benefits

for such programs are that these second-, third- and fourth-year students have recently

lived through the experience that first-year students face so they have a strong

understanding of what it takes to successfully overcome the challenges of balancing

academics and involvement in extra-curricular activities such as fine arts, athletics and

service with adjustment issues such as homesickness and social pressures. Another

benefit is that peers may appear to be more approachable to first-year students than a

faculty or staff member may be. Dean Murphy from Turner College articulated it this

way:

> I think it (peer mentoring) is one of the strengths of the colleges. You know, the students are going to listen to a peer more than old deans, and it is good for new students who are the writing assistants and who are the peer tutors. They get training in how to ask questions, and it is good for them.

Dr. Spencer is convinced that student mentors are meaningful to student

persistence. Turner College began a program, funded by a foundation, where student

mentors were trained in learning theory in order to help them become stronger mentors.

She elaborated:

> But there's something magical about that for students, having a peer who knows now about learning, they know about new information on the brain and education and they know something about student development theory partnering with a faculty member who often doesn't have any of that information. And so the student is teaching the faculty member about things like – I'll give you an example, consolidation. The LA [learning assistant] was very, very excited that she had partnered with a faculty member who has been here for maybe 40 years, excellent faculty member but old-school. He was quizzing them right after class and she said, 'You know, I don't think you're getting a true measure of what they understand until you give them a day to think about it, consolidate it, and learn it because that's what rest does; quiz them the next class'. He came to me

and he said, 'I never knew about consolidation'. It was really a very cute moment and he said, 'I've been doing that all wrong for a long time'. I said it wasn't wrong. It's what we knew back then, that's how we were taught. So they end up teaching faculty and I think that really helps.

At Jay College, peers are also called on to help facilitate discussions with new students about lifestyle choices and challenges they may face outside the classroom, such as potential substance abuse education. Dean Brown addressed how upper class students are helpful in this effort at Jay College:

> I think that our peer assistance group which deals with drug and alcohol education for which we select about a dozen, 15 students a year to work on this creates a very non- threatening environment where students can come and discuss problems that they're having and all. I think that's been helpful.

Turner College has a special environment, as described by faculty, staff and students and as observed during my campus visit. There was an unusual sense of willingness to help and willingness to accept help. There was a flow and flexibility and openness that allowed a student to be helped one semester and to help someone else the following semester. There seemed to be an absence of any stigma attached to getting help. In fact, students, faculty and staff seemed to embrace that as a special benefit of the campus community. The fact that the academic resource center is centrally located on campus serves to facilitate this sense of acceptance and an encouragement to use the resources available. Dr. Spencer described it this way:

> My feeling is students, peers [are the most important]. I think peers help peers adjust, adapt, develop good strategies, and support each other. I think we have an exceptional population of people who care about other people. I don't think we build that in them. I think they come to us with it, I don't know why. We have to find between 70 volunteer note-takers every semester for students with disabilities. And usually it's one request for each and the students bring their notes in every single week to have

them copied and then we ship them off electronically to the student with the disability. Every college has always remarked that they can't even get five but these kids come in here willingly… They want to help them. I really think it's peers. Second to that I think it's we have a really caring group of people at this Turner who want to usher these young people into our home. … I've never met a group of faculty and a group of administrators who are so student-friendly and we maintain our hires–. We seem to be hiring people who care first about teaching and second about research. So second after the peers I would say it's the staff and their attitude and how they build community, how we play with these students, how we participate with them in this journey.

Ms. Bailey also commented on this positive environment at Turner, highlighting the idea that students can play both roles of tutor and tutee and the need for training so that tutors can cover many different topics with new students. The long-standing program is a definite benefit to students:

…in any given year we see almost half of the population in this office and we have 300 tutors which is 11 to 12 percent of our total population on campus. So we have a huge group of peers who are ushering students into this atmosphere and this environment and they connect to those people and the tutors tend to be very enthusiastic and very yielding and forgiving when they don't show up on time. They end up talking about lots of things about campus life rather than just tutoring the subject area and our tutors are well trained; we have about 50 different topics so far that we do tutor training for and we've been certified by the college reading and learning association for 20 years. So it's been a long history that we've had – that we've been using national standards for training and recruiting our tutors. Most of our tutors were tutored.

These three institutions attract students who seek to be part of a campus community where help and support are available. It appears that they like both to be nurtured and to be nurturers themselves. Ms. Mercado, of Nile University, summed it up this way:

…students who have navigated the first year of transition successfully and now see that that was helpful to them and they want to be a part of that.

This study indicates that students stay enrolled at their original college because the college experience meets or exceeds their expectations and because they are well connected to people and programs at the college. Understanding why students leave may also provide insight into why they stay, so faculty and administrators were asked to identify reasons students leave their campuses during or after the first year. The next section provides a discussion of policies, programs and practices that are consistent with student attrition on three ELCA college campuses whose first-to-second year student retention is stronger than expected.

Reasons for Student Departure

When asked to provide information on why students leave their campuses, faculty and administrators typically paused to think of the students they knew who left. They voiced difficulty citing thematic reasons because so few freshmen leave each year. According to the *ELCA Colleges Trends and Analysis Report* (2010), Jay College's first-to-second year retention rate was 95.9%, Nile University's was 86.5%, and Turner College's first-to-second year retention rate was 91.6%. With entering classes of approximately 600 freshmen each, these institutions only lost 25 to 81 students between the first and second year. The absence of a critical mass of students leaving makes theming their reasons for attrition understandably difficult. After some consideration, each offered anecdotal information about student departure. Among the reasons offered were poor academic achievement, health/social challenges and size of the college, financial issues, and a poor fit between the student and the institution, including the lack

of desired programs. Dr. Finch, director of institutional research and assistant provost at

Nile University summarized it this way:

> When you have such a small population that's leaving, all of them leave
> for different reasons. Some of them might leave because they're too far
> from home, whether home is [near] or [far]. Some may leave because
> there is a boyfriend or girlfriend who is somewhere else. Some may leave
> for academic reasons. Some may leave for financial reasons. Some may
> leave because they had a terrible roommate their first year and it just
> ruined the whole NU experience and there's no way to rehabilitate it.
> Some may leave for mental health issues. Some may leave for physical
> health issues. There are just so many different things out there.

Professor Brown from Jay College spoke again to the issue of fit. He did not

seem to feel that either the institution or the student was at fault; rather, an acceptance

that sometimes it just is not going to be an ideal fit despite efforts to avoid it. He said:

> You can't be all things to all people. You do your best to bring in as many
> people that you think fit the profile and would be happy on the campus but
> I think [it] stands to reason that a number of them are going to find that no,
> this isn't the case.

Poor academic achievement. In addressing the issue of student-institutional fit,

there was general consensus that the institutions were doing a good job of enrolling

students with the ability to succeed. Still, some students did not perform academically as

strong as expected and some of those were asked to leave the institution. Nile University

administrators had done some analysis in an effort to identify factors consistent with poor

academic performance. Dr. Mann at Nile University spoke of this process in detail:

> We said, "Okay, let's a pick a credit cut off. Let's say it is 25 credits, and
> then let's pick an equally arbitrary GPA cutoff." That is 2.5. We asked
> the question, "If a student in the first year does not earn at least a 2.5 and
> 25 successfully completed credits, what is their fate?" We found that
> those students who don't make those two marks and come back for a third
> semester are three times more likely to attrit than students who do make

those markers and come back for one more semester. We started calling
that the performance marker….

Poor academic performance often appears with other issues that result in student

attrition. Mr. McDonald, director of residence, life spoke of the combination of related

factors that he sees at Nile University as reasons for student departure:

> It's [why students leave] typically if they do not feel like they belong to
> the institution or they are not doing well academically, or they are not able
> to form meaningful relationships, or they miss home, those are some of the
> main factors, and sometimes they occur together.

Program not available. There was some discussion indicating that students who

did not have an academic home, those who did not have a particular major in mind, were

at greater risk of leaving the institution. Similarly, students who desire a major (after

enrollment) that the college does not offer are highly likely to leave in order to find the

program at another institution. Associate Dean of Students at Nile University, Ms.

Thomas, expressed it as an area that the institution could try to manage but could not

control:

> Just speaking from my experience in working with students who have
> exited, much of it is related to us not offering majors that they are
> interested in pursuing. They are coming in undecided and they have taken
> a series of classes and have decided, okay this is what I want to do but we
> do not offer as a major. We continue to work with them to try to create
> something that would fit that need or they have already identified an
> institution that will work more so. It is less, then, about dissatisfaction
> with the academic programs. It's not dissatisfaction with the environment;
> it's been more about their desire to pursue something that we do not offer.

Professor Green expressed a similar thought and he offered examples of two

students who left because they had done well at Turner and wanted even greater

opportunities that they could find in a larger metropolitan area:

She transferred to American because she wanted wider offerings in business. And she has graduated and done. She wanted more offerings. Occasionally, I had one other student who went to Pace in New York and it was the same thing. He wanted a wider set of offerings.

Health/social reasons and size of the college. Other contributions to student

attrition are areas over which the institution does not have control, including student

mental and physical health issues and social issues that are sometimes a function of the

size of the institution. Turner College's Ms. Spencer reflected that being known as a

caring college carries tremendous benefits in attracting and retaining students, but that

same attribute can occasionally lead to student attrition. The idea is that if the college

attracts an unusual number of students with health issues because the institution is seen as

a safe and nurturing place to go, that might result in enrolling some students who need

more than the college can offer. She said:

> So we do draw students with serious health issues because we're the [college that cares] and they sometimes have to go back home where somebody's keeping a better eye on them; especially those who insist on having a single room because you get lonely in a single room; they don't understand that.

Dr. Jones, dean of students at Jay College, also expressed health issues as a reason for

student departure:

> I feel like we had a lot of students who have gone on medical withdraws but you know it's proportionate. When I think about the institution I just came from, I probably had this same proportion of medical withdraws. It just feels like so many more here because there are so fewer of other reasons that they leave.

Some interviewees who have been in higher education for many years pointed out

that students today seem to come to college with far greater issues than did students in

years past, and that may result in greater student attrition. There was reflection as to how

much of that is driven by changes in society that lead to more complex lives and how

much of it is simply a reflection that more personal issues are openly discussed now.

Professor Nielsen (Nile University) observed:

> And of course some students leave because they just have – they bring
> with them issues and baggage that we cannot possibly seem to address
> fully. It could be learning issues, it could be, oh, I don't know,
> personality, family, crises.

Homesickness has always been a challenge for first-year college students who are

living away from home for the first time. Ironically, technology that is meant to keep

people in stronger communication may actually contribute to homesickness of students.

Ms. Thomas at Nile University offered this interesting perspective, indicating that some

students may not have the personal skills to overcome their homesickness:

> We have seen an increase in student homesickness. I have been doing the
> first year programs now for over 20 years and I have to say probably over
> the last five years there has just been a tremendous increase in student's
> lack of resiliency in being able to separate from home. Part of it I think is
> the students now are not forced to disconnect. They stay connected via
> texting, Skype, and all of that, and I do not think our students are any
> different in that respect, but it certainly increases the need for us to be
> vigilant to first for students who are experiencing mild homesickness to
> those who are experiencing severe homesickness. For me that is part of
> the growing issues is how do we get students who are homesick to realize
> that this can be a whole new life and just because they are here does not
> mean they are forsaking their families, or their pets, or their siblings. It is
> getting them to understand that's part of the developmental process is
> letting go.

Financial. Typically, there are multiple issues that cause students to leave

college. There was some sense that it is the cumulative effect of all the emerging issues

that cause student departure. At Jay College Professor Connor described how it can all

add up. Often the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back is the financial piece:

But there are certain nursing students who come to me, and they tell me, that they have these terrible details, their parents are getting divorced, my father lost his job, my little brother was in a car accident, don't know how we are going to pay for this, how can I stay at Jay, and they tell me stories that are total genuine stories.

Financial issues can be either an *inability* to pay for college or an *unwillingness* to pay. Students and families also make value judgments in a cost-benefit analysis. If the benefits or potential benefits are seen as greater than the cost, the students are more likely to persist at their college. If, however, as Professor Connor suggests, the benefits are perceived as less valuable than the cost, the student is more likely to leave college:

How can you demonstrate to that consumer that you're actually delivering on their commitment of $40,000 a year? Now how many people are actually paying full price? But nevertheless, they see that and say, 'I want to get $40,000 worth of value out of this. Can you guarantee my son will get a job? My daughter will get into grad school?'… There are no guarantees.

Several interviewees spoke of the fact that students often find it hard to discuss their reasons for leaving, and discussing finances is an especially challenging task. Dean Mann described conversations with students about their decision to leave Nile University:

I don't know what the dynamic might be when you've got a 19-year-old kid in your office and you are talking to him about why you are leaving. Actually, I do know. (laughter) There is a lot of evasion and covering and talking about, "We just can't afford it."

Not the best fit. Just as a good fit between student and institution contributes to strong student satisfaction and persistence, lack of a good fit, for a variety of reasons, contributes to attrition. Sometimes the lack of a good fit occurs because students – and their dreams and expectations – change. Professor Anderson described strong,

academically prepared students who attended Turner College, flourished academically,

and discovered their capabilities and decided to pursue even stronger academic

challenges:

> I think that we often tend to lose students in the upper tier because some of
> them even find their feet here and realize they can do more.

Professor Anderson went on to describe the benefits of having strong programs in place

for students at the lower end of the academic spectrum and the challenges those programs

and policies might present for students at the higher end. For example, at Turner College,

grades are systematically checked for all students at midterm. For students who need

help, this is a beneficial strategy, but for strong students it may have an adverse effect:

> I think at the lower end, the students who drop out because they just can't
> cut it or they're not ready for college, we've got a lot of safety nets for
> those students, and I think that if anything the polices there hopefully
> keeps some kids in who would be better served by taking a year off. I
> think at the upper end, a lot of those kinds of polices can feel very
> paternalistic. Again, the students who really want to be independent all of
> a sudden [don't] like that. Even though they're doing well, someone's
> checking their grades and sending it to their parents.

Some faculty and administrators questioned how students enrolled with a lack of

awareness of certain fundamental aspects of the college, such as its church-relatedness,

size or location. Each of those characteristics was identified as not being embraced by

some students. Professor Connor at Jay College was surprised when students left upon

discovering that Jay College is church-related:

> The ones that we do lose, I think never really thought about the church
> relatedness of the college. They say, oh I just went there because I could
> play hockey, and I wasn't able to start and I'm leaving. I've had a couple
> of students like that who flat out said, I never thought this place was
> church related. How can you not? I guess they never visited.

Dean Brown supported the idea that the student-institution fit is of strong importance and he showed the ways that a lack of fit can emerge as college students mature and grow with their college experience. He said the following about some Jay College students:

> Some students leave I know because they've discovered that Jay is not either what they thought it was or they thought that they would adapt to what we have to offer and they've concluded that they were mistaken. We are, as you can see, we are a small campus in a small town and a number of our students come from metropolitan areas. And I know that over the years I've run into students who simply want the anonymity of the [nearby large public university].

In contrast, Professor Nielsen identified a lack of personal growth and maturation as a reason that some students at Nile University may not persist. She said:

> So I think sometimes students leave because they haven't matured enough to know what they want from college or what they want in their life and they've just sort of taken the trajectory that was formed for them but they get here and they realize they don't know why they're here.

One might assume that clear institutional strategic goals for student retention would be among the reasons that some colleges and universities achieve stronger than expected student persistence rates from the first to second year. Discussion with faculty and administrators about retention initiatives on their campuses provided thought-provoking results. The next section provides a summary of the discussions about campus-wide goals for achieving strong retention.

Intentional About Student Success But Not of Retention

Each interviewee was asked whether he or she was aware of campus-wide retention goals and whether there is a driver of retention efforts on each campus. The

response to these questions was both unexpected and thought-provoking. Almost every time the question was asked, the respondent paused to think before responding. With the exception of the chief enrollment officers at Jay College and Nile University, neither faculty nor administrators were aware of institutional goals specifically for retention of students. Jay and Turner College representatives were aware that retention rates are strong on their campuses and they assumed that senior administrators monitor those metrics, but no one could recall a specific plan to achieve the desired metrics. Ms. Spencer's response was similar to all other responses at Turner University:

> You know, I'm not really sure if we do have any that are outwardly stated. It's clear that we need to provide good service to our students, that we need to help educate them along the way so that they understand why we have some of the policy and practices. If we do, [have stated retention goals] I'm not aware of it. …

Upon additional reflection, she added:

> The college has bragged about it so I guess there's this unwritten assumption that retention is important but we'd rather have a community that works well together than retain a student that really doesn't belong in the community. So I also know that's true; we're not afraid to dismiss in that first year if it's a person who's disruptive to the community.

Professor Green stated it simply:

> Retention is not the goal, it's what is reported. It's a result of what we normally do at Turner.

These responses suggest that colleges and universities with strong retention and graduation rates are primarily focused on the *success of their students* rather than the *success of the institution* so that student retention is the result of the student focus rather than the goal itself. Siedman's (2005) compilation of studies on college student retention

supports this distinction. In the first chapter, Berger and Lyon (2005) define retention as

"the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through

graduation" (p. 7). Student success is the ability of students to achieve their educational

goals. This includes, but is not limited to graduation. According to Kuh (2005), colleges

can intentionally create policies and practices to aid students in their persistence. Dean

Mann at Nile University stated it as an institutional mindset:

> How do we create a culture in which people view themselves as
> practitioners of student success? That's a mindset.

There was some sense that focusing on retention was an indication of financial

difficulties for the institution. Professor Connor reflected on a time at Jay College when

financial difficulties resulted in a campus-wide focus on student retention.

> The only time I can recall where we explicitly as an institution talked
> about retention, again from my perspective, I'm sure there are pockets of
> this going on in admin and academic advising and they're having all kinds
> of things, but as far as my part of the institution, it was exclusively
> mentioned when we were facing recent financial difficulties. And people
> were saying, think about how we can keep those students here. Are we that
> desperate where we're trying to make sure somebody passes, so they don't
> get on second semester of academic probation so they have to withdraw?
> Are we that desperate for that $20,000 for that one person? That's the only
> time I really heard about that word retention as part of a conversation,
> which was essential to savings.

Nile University offered a contrasting view to the other two colleges in an

important regard. Jay and Turner Colleges have had stable first-to-second year retention

rates for years, whereas Nile University's first-to-second year rate has slipped in recent

years. In 2008, according to the *2010 ELCA Trends and Analysis Report,* the first-to-

second year retention rates at Jay and Turner Colleges respectively were 96% and 91%

and the four-year graduation rates were 81% and 78% respectively. While Nile's first-to-

second year retention rates are still among the higher rates compared to similar

institutions, its awareness of the recent decline has resulted in the creation of a campus-

wide effort to study student persistence and attrition and to identify and execute ways to

strengthen first-to-second year retention. Professor Nielsen spoke to the emergence of

retention conversation on campus.

> In the very recent years, a lot of attention has been drawn to the issue of
> retention campus-wide among administrators, among department heads,
> among faculty, so I think it's – first of all I – and this is sort of in more
> recent sort of awareness, it's something that's on everybody's radar.
> Whereas if you asked me ten or twelve years ago what I thought about
> retention or what I knew about retention rates I was probably clueless
> because it wasn't really talked about as much, so I think it's – it seems to
> me kind of a recent awareness, not a recent issue but just something that's
> getting a lot more attention.

According to Dr. Finch in institutional research, the recent erosion of first-to-

second year retention has been a driver for the campus-wide conversation about what the

university can do to reverse the recent trend:

> We haven't been at 90% in a long time… The data which I have, our high
> was 90%, but some of the schools in our comparison group are regularly
> 92%, 93%. Some of them, I'm not sure what they do which is different
> from what we do. If you look at a lot of the schools which have retention
> rates above 95%, these are the schools which have such top notch
> reputations and attract the top notch students.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 84% of the first-time

freshmen who enrolled in Nile University in fall 2011 returned for their second year. The

highest first-to- second year retention rates at Nile occurred in 1999 with a 92% rate and

in 2003 with a 90% rate, according to the *ELCA Trends Analysis* (2009). While still an

enviable rate for many four-year liberal arts colleges, this drop seems to have generated

conversations of student persistence at Nile. There was greater awareness at Nile

University of a retention committee; and faculty as well as student affairs, academic

affairs, and enrollment management staff were aware of the on-going conversation to

improve retention. The academic dean articulated the goal to improve retention by one

percentage point per year. Others were aware of the task force, chaired by the chief

enrollment officer. Dean Mann provided a vivid description of the process that produced

a 96-page report detailing persistence and non-persistence of students at Nile:

> It started in October of 2010, and this was a mammoth project. There
> were probably 60 people at one time involved. There was [a lot] of data
> gathering and [a lot] of brainstorming. The group produced a set of
> recommendations a very rich and comprehensive report with more
> recommendations that you can shake a stick at. It was January of '12. …
> Those recommendations were going to be fed into this new structure
> [being created in the academic affairs office and including a chief
> retention officer].

This study suggests that institutions with strong retention and graduation rates

focus first on ways to enhance student success and the metrics are merely by-products of

student success. Further, institutions that wish to improve their retention and graduation

rates appear to focus on the measurement first and seek to find ways to help their students

succeed in order to achieve the stronger rates they desire. Dean Mann at Nile University

referred to retention as "a number that reflects what you should be doing to engage

students and foster their success". Professor Green at Turner College and Dean Jones at

Jay College also offered insightful illustrations of the distinction between a retention-

focused campus and a student success-oriented campus:

One of the things that we do that is unique that way, I was trying to think, what is unique that we do? So much of it just seems to be the natural, everyday feel of this place. But I couldn't find anything that was actually aimed at retention. … Retention is not the goal, it's what is reported. It's a result of what we normally do.

… I mean I don't think that we're intentional about retention. I think we're intentional about individual student circumstances.

In contrast, at Nile University where first-to-second year retention rates have fallen in recent years, the focus has shifted to why students leave rather than why they stay. Dean Mann, who has been instrumental in an institutional reorganization that will create a position to focus on retention efforts within academic affairs, offered this when asked why the college's retention rates are higher than average:

It is a really interesting way of putting the question. I would have to say that we have been actually putting to ourselves the opposite question: Why do they leave? We have been trying to understand it from a perspective of, 'What could we do to close gaps of the perceived experience that the students are having?'

There was a sense that agility and a lack of bureaucracy allow campus leaders to make continuous improvements in providing a campus environment best for their students. At Jay College, for example, the meal plan has recently been changed to allow faculty and students to enter the dining hall at will, with extended hours and a la carte service. Some campus leaders feel this change in policy has contributed to the sense of community on campus. Dr. Wilson described the benefits as:

...the ease to which you can navigate the system… Well, the net effect of that is, that you have faculty and staff in there every day eating, every meal. … What you find in here is, this is open at 7:00 in the morning, closes at 10:00 at night, people will go in there, have a cup of coffee and study. You will find faculty in there grading papers.

Ms. Bailey also expressed the benefits of a small campus with a lack of bureaucracy at

Turner College:

> I've always been amazed and proud of that, but I think a lot of it is that
> kind of attention to individuals, that sense that we are a small campus, and
> we get to make sure that we're listening to students, making changes as
> appropriate.

Summary

Conversations with faculty and administrators on three ELCA campuses with

higher than expected first-to-second year retention rates provided robust examples of

relationships that matter. At the core of these institutions is an intentionally strong

campus-wide sense of community. Faculty and administrators continuously provided

examples of policies, programs and practices that contribute to the sense of community

on their campuses. Meaningful programs, policies and practices, articulated by faculty

and administrators, were found in and out of the classroom.

The second research question addressed in this study discusses programs, policies,

and practices identified by students as important in their decision to return to their ELCA

college for the second year. The next section highlights findings from the student

perspective, many of which are similar to those identified by faculty and administrators.

Persistence Themes Identified by Students

Review of focus group transcripts and field notes produced several themes

identified by students as important to both their selection of their institution and to their

persistence at that institution. One or two focus groups with students were conducted on

each campus, for a total of 26 students. Two focus groups were conducted at Jay College

for a total of seven students, including six freshmen and one senior. One focus group was held at Turner College, with a total of ten freshmen participants. One focus group at Nile University included nine students, including representatives from all years with six having just completed their first year. Several themes emerged that were common to students on each of the three campuses. Students were asked (a) to articulate the reasons they selected their college, (b) to describe their first year there, and (c) to identify programs, policies and practices that were important to students' decisions to stay, or to leave, their institution.

Several themes emerged as students described the important factors in the selection of their college, in their description of the first-year experience, and in their reasons for continuing to attend their college choice. Students on each campus spoke first and foremost about the sense of community found on their campus and they richly described the ways in which relationships with peers and faculty contributed to that sense of community. They were also consistent in their desire to become deeply involved in academic and co-curricular campus life. This was true of the more formal ways of involvement such as classes, labs, clubs, and organizations as well as informal involvement including "hanging out" with friends and meeting faculty and staff members at various settings and venues around campus. Similarly, they spoke of students who were not strongly involved and connected in campus life as those who are more likely to leave college. Ms. Bailey, from residence life at Turner College, summarized it most aptly as she described what she believes is at the core of a student's decision to stay in college:

I think some of the reading that I've done, if a piece of my students stay, it's because they found that connection, whether it's with the faculty and/or their peers, or maybe it's a club that really gets them going and makes them happy to get up in the morning, whatever it is. I think that it's that sense that I found something that makes me feel like I belong here.

Selection of College

Personal connections and community. Nearly every student on each campus identified 'the people' or 'the community' as being a strong attraction to the campus. They provided numerous examples of faculty, staff, alumni, and currently enrolled students in their description of why they chose that campus. For some, the articulation of the community was simply stated as 'the welcoming atmosphere." One Jay College student offered:

I originally was going to [big state school] because of the price and that's such a big factor going to college, but after talking it over with my parents, we decided that the community feeling is so important and that going to college is a big step already and going to a bigger school, you might get lost and talking to some of my friends at the bigger schools they did feel they were lost. And here I don't feel lost at all. I feel like there is such a great [group of] people, a community of people who are there to support me, especially the professors. If I need help they're not going to be interested in graduate students or research, they are in their office and willing to talk to me.

Some students cited the number of faculty and students as most important in their choice. A Turner student provided an example:

I just looked at the ratios. That was one of the biggest things that I kept looking at, the student to teacher ratio. Even on tours you would talk to the tour guides and some of the students there and it was like, 'I know this professor.' One was telling me that she had taken some science courses here and she said her one science professor had an assignment where they had to go meet her and just have a normal conversation. It was almost like a student/teacher date sort of; just meet them and know them by name. I actually ended up having that same professor and it was a really cool

experience.

Several students found it difficult to isolate individual factors that prompted their selection of their college and instead spoke of a more vague overall positive feeling. Jay students offered:

> …the feeling that I get here is the main reason why I chose this college, because of the atmosphere. Not the academics, oh, I mean they were part of it, like the distance, academics, where it was located were definitely a part of me choosing this college, but the atmosphere was definitely something I wanted to have.

> I also agree with the welcoming atmosphere and in comparison to [another college] especially, but other schools, I didn't feel like they really wanted me there. I felt like they were just kind of like, well, here we are; if you're good enough, we'll let you in. Jay College felt more like, oh, we want you.

Students in these focus groups spoke often about their relationships with faculty. Students at Turner College in particular mentioned relationships with faculty as a primary reason for selecting and staying at their college.

> I know it would seem like I'm agreeing with everyone here but I think that one of the running points that really just allowed the community to be strong is the professors really care to be here. In every class I've been in, I never actually had a professor who is just focused on his or her research or just focused on what they're doing, that they're not actually going to take the time of day for all of us because I feel that here at Turner [College]… it's an undergraduate college that brings professors whose real target is to teach.

> I had a lot of connections with people that went to Turner but I didn't know they went to Turner… high school teachers. I am a pre-med student so I spoke to doctors in hospitals, too, and [some] said they graduated from Turner and then when I came and visited the campus, just like interviewing with the admissions counselors, they are some of the nicest people you will ever meet. So it was just kind of right up front, like a really good right institution. Very good.

I had spent time on the phone with a professor here, like to advise me to help me pick classes because I was unable to come [to campus]. This was right before the summer recess, so they called me right before, took my deposit and I spent a long time on the phone with the professor and it wasn't someone from the admissions office. It was actually a professor of the music department that called me and wanted to talk about Turner [College].

My dad realized that a professor of biology had emailed me and I'm going to be a biology major, so my dad contacted the head of biology and they actually gave us an individual tour of the whole classrooms and just the whole department and all of the labs and we were also really impressed that he was very laid back and he was very nice and we talked for a while in his office.

I was terrified about going to college and I think for me in that info sessions compared to other schools was here and be really supported and I wouldn't have believed that if I didn't see it for myself by staying with a student here. All her friends were so nice. They all really wanted me to come here and they were all incredibly happy. Then I talked to professors and they also just really wanted to get to know me and it was different from all the other schools I had contacted.

Size of institution. Students considered large and small colleges and universities but ultimately chose the smaller institutions because of the type of atmosphere and experiences provided by a smaller setting. Size and the ability to interact in a variety of ways with faculty seemed to go hand-in-hand. The students who chose these smaller institutions valued the opportunity to be a more active participant in their own education, to be an explorer rather than a tourist. In other words, students who selected these colleges wanted to be known by their professors, to be challenged, and to be engaged at a high level. Turner students commented:

It is also the small campus that really drove me to come here because I like my professors and really getting to know them and working alongside them. … You really get to know your professors more than just [in] the classroom.

I really liked that it was really small and all of your professors knew you by name and you could get one on one time with them whether you go to office hours and stuff like that. Almost like you are looked after and you are just a number, you are an individual here.

Jay students articulated a similar feeling:

… being remembered and being acknowledged as your own person. They gave me really good money with merit base, financial aid, and stuff. There are a lot of good things about Jay [College].

The fact that we were the only people on campus [when we visited] was weird to me but I enjoyed it so much even when we were the only people. Yeah, the feeling I got was just feeling like I wouldn't be alone and [that I'd be] supported. I guess that's what I needed for being so far away [from home]. That's exactly what I needed to feel.

Specific programs. In addition to size, most students had a potential major or program in mind when selecting their college and confirming that the campus had solid programs in those areas was important. Turner students provided these examples:

I was a dance major and so I was looking at different schools in the arts, not sure if I wanted a BFA program or a BA program. Basically I had a friend that went here for dance and she said she loved it. I also visited [other larger] schools … and I realized that I did not want to just dance. I wanted to have interdisciplinary and some business too and that was a major deciding factor… I ended up choosing here because I did not want to just be a number. I wanted to have that personal connection with faculty and other students.

I chose Turner [College] because first off I wanted to study sciences and I was looking at a lot of schools that kind of focused, or had a really strong science program. Also the campus seemed really well rounded in terms of people getting involved in different types of activities and stuff and you hear a lot of people double majoring … so there is that flexibility of being able to just take what you want and to take whatever interests you.

Campus beauty and location. Distance from home and the beauty of the campus were also cited as important factors in selecting a college. Some students wanted

to be close to home while a few adventurous students wanted to be far from home for the

added experience of 'going away' to college. Almost every student mentioned the

physical beauty of the campus they choose. Often the beauty of the campus made an

impact before they even got out of the car. One Jay College student remembered his first

campus visit:

> I remember when I first went up the hill here, I was just like, oh my God, I
> just got …these butterflies because it looked amazing.
>
> I'll never forget when we came here to register. … As soon as my parents
> and I drove up… and saw [the campus], it was the middle of summer so it
> was super nice outside and flowers and trees everywhere, and they said,
> 'You belong here. I feel comfortable sending you here'. They hadn't
> even been on campus yet, we were still in the car. So I think I like the
> physical beauty most of all.
>
> I like the chapel, the center of campus. I like how everything is kind of
> around that. It's not a far walk from anything anywhere you want on
> campus, which was something I was looking for. I really enjoy how the
> chapel is the center.

And a Nile student commented:

> I know I was drawn to it originally because of just how beautiful the
> campus was and that is like the first stimuli that you get and it's just like
> whoa, everything is ridiculously gorgeous!

The beauty of the area surrounding the two rural campuses was often cited as an

attraction for students. A Jay student elaborated on the surrounding area:

> It was just beautiful because it's kind of hilly. It seems like it's kind of a
> mountainous area. I was tired of being in the city. I really like the way the
> buildings just set up at the campus. I really, really like the environment.
> It's just beautiful.

The First-Year Experience

Students described their first year openly and honesty. They spoke of their transition to college and of the challenges during that transition. They also spoke of the supportive environment that helped them overcome their personal challenges. Among the most important factors in their decision to return for their second year were the community, including references to friends and professors, feeling generally accepted, having the ability to be involved, and to take on leadership roles early in their college careers. Some even mentioned particular facilities as being instrumental in their positive adjustment.

Stressful but supportive. Students were surprisingly open about the difficulties of the high school-to-college transition. The transition, and the resulting stress they felt, was an accepted part of the college experience as they described it. They were clear, however, that students who found coping mechanisms through involvement and/or through personal connections were successful in overcoming those stresses, an achievement that led to persistence in college. They provided examples of students who, for a variety of reasons, did not find strategies to ease the transitional stresses and those students were examples of non-persisters. In some cases, stress resulted from the increased academic work load found in college. A Turner College student commented:

> High school is such a polar opposite of what college is, as far as work and everything. You might take AP courses in high school, but that does not prepare you for college. You can sleep in high school and do fine. If you sleep through college you are not going to do very well.

In other cases, stress came in the form of evolving interests in college. Several students mentioned entering with a particular major in mind, followed by panic when they no longer wanted to pursue that program. For some, the process of finding a new academic home was a stressful process. Turner students spoke about their stressful adjustment to college:

> [My first] year was particularly stressful because I came here for the sciences and then I decided I did not want to do it anymore. It became a matter of gathering information about other majors and if I [could] complete it in four years. The school is fairly expensive and I don't want to spend any more time here than I have to. Figuring that out was very stressful and I'm not a creature of change and when I first came here I was very unhappy because I hated being away from home and being away from my friends at home. As I just kept taking my classes and forced myself to sit next to new people every day it started getting better and better. It was really the social thing that really scared me the most about not being able to find anyone to talk to.

> I did not realize how structured my life was before I came here, that and trying to figure out where I fit in terms of the student body, socially and … even academically just figuring out if I wanted to keep going with the bio major I entered with. Do I want to stick with it or try something else?

Not surprisingly, social issues such as homesickness, worry over making friends, fitting in, and being away from family and support groups were identified as challenges in the transition process. As students described these feelings, it seemed that part of their discomfort was due to their surprise that these feelings emerged at all. There was almost a sense that the simple act of being in college should automatically provide the skills necessary to be a successful college student. A Jay student articulated this point:

> For me, personally, at the beginning of the year, I actually really struggled with being very homesick, and I think a lot of my friends could really see that I was having troubles. I thought I was going to be fine, this big independent girl going away from home. I was actually really struggling

and my friends really helped to keep me busy and get me involved in things… to keep my mind off things. They were all freshmen because all freshmen lived together in a dorm. … a lot of the reason I'm still here is I could not imagine leaving the friends I've made.

Though cost was mentioned several times as a factor in both the selection of a college and in the decision of whether or not to return, one student framed it as a personal balancing act between cost and the degree to which he liked the college. He articulated, and other students agreed, that if an institution was high cost, the "like factor" should also be high. During the transition, when connections to the college were forming, there was an imbalance between the "like factor" and the cost factor, and that resulted in consideration of transferring. When social and academic connections became strong enough to balance the cost factor, the thought of transferring diminished, as articulated by a Jay student:

> … It's just that I felt like if I am paying this much money to go here, I should just be absolutely 100% head over heels with Jay [College]. I wasn't feeling that way yet. Again, I was thinking about maybe transferring to [another larger private college], being closer to home, being closer to my sister. I did apply to [that college] and got accepted. I was just going to compare costs really and see if there was a big difference. If there was a big difference, I really might have transferred, not because I didn't like Jay … but because of money. Like I said, I feel like I should really love it here. Again, the longer the year went on, I loved it more and more every day. I invested more at Jay. It's harder for me to picture myself even going somewhere else.

Social interaction and involvement. Social involvement in college is fundamental to a successful transition for new students. Meaningful ways to be involved were articulated by almost all students in the focus groups. Since each student entered college with unique interests, involvement occurred in as many unique ways. Though

most students described being involved at multiple levels – academic, athletic, and extra-

curricular – students typically described an area of particular or primary importance to

them. For some students this involvement happened in formal ways, such as in a class,

club or sport or through freshman orientation. For others, the meaningful involvement

came from more informal interactions, such as living conditions. Students on each

campus spoke of the ease of making friends in all freshmen residences (rather than a

mixture of new students and upperclass) halls. A Turner student commented:

> I think the living conditions for freshmen have a lot to do with how happy
> they are and it's like a concert or loud party going on and it's really an
> interesting experience. But the main part that I'm … is the doors are
> always open and that's how I think that a lot of us met, so that was
> definitely, for me, that's how I made friends and had a good first
> experience.

A student at Jay College made a similar comment:

> I had such an awesome time the entire year… I found that it was really
> easy to make friends quickly through so many ways. Jay promotes that in
> the orientation. I lived in co-ed [housing] which has sections instead of
> the hallway. … I joined the Ultimate Frisbee. I was really into
> extracurriculars. … It was really fun. One major part of my freshman year
> was being in choir. It was a really good way to meet people. … I just felt
> at home immediately here.

Another prevalent theme from students was a general sense of feeling comfortable

on a campus. This feeling was described as both a reason for selection of their college

and for persisting at their college. A Jay student articulated on this general sense of

comfort:

> I just think meeting more people. I am in choir. I think that really helps
> you. I started in choir first semester. … I felt so safe and secure in my
> choir, if that makes sense. I think it's just a feeling of comfortablenesss
> that's really helped me.

Programs, Policies, and Practices Influencing Student Persistence

      Relationships and community. The most common reason students at all institutions gave for persisting at their college centered on a sense of community that resulted from relationships with faculty, fellow students, and administrators. Of note is the fact that relationships with faculty were mentioned first and most often by many of the students, but particularly with students from Turner College.

> It feels like one of the things that Turner really does a great job [of is] presenting itself as a community. I think that is one of the calling points that explains why it has such a high returning rate, is because people expect that and they find it. It's especially a very close knit community that really helps itself through that first year that is a very difficult time for most students.

      These relationships with faculty helped create a supportive community that fostered student success. A second-year student at Turner College commented:

> What was really important for me was being in an environment where I was able to succeed. So Turner is perfect for that because I've known the professors were readily available, there is a big tutoring center here that's readily available for extra help, and there is also a [tutoring] workshop that you can go to. Again, I felt that I wanted to really be in an environment where I was most likely to succeed and this was it.

Another Turner student expanded to give his definition of success in college.

> For me it was numbers and that was, I think, something like 85 to 90 percent of pre- health students or pre-med students get into medical school from here. So not only are they very smart kids, obviously they were able to get in but I knew that there had to be other factors to get that great of a number. … So, you have to have good professors; you have to have good classes so you can [achieve] that number.

      Success in college was defined in the present tense in terms of successfully balancing all the expectations of life as an undergraduate as well as with expectations for

the future. Another Turner student expanded on how students achieve post-baccalaureate

success.

> I found the research [was great] and research is so prevalent among the
> science students. … [Professors] actually have an undergraduate working
> on one of the top notch papers that one of the professors would probably
> be doing. And when it comes down to it, most undergraduate institutions
> wouldn't have that level of research and give it to undergraduate students.

> I would definitely say that is probably what makes this school such an
> impactful school is the fact that your professors are so down to earth and
> very willing to help. I think … academics is the real answer to the
> question. It's the academic programs and our faculty that makes it the
> most appealing.

The development of personal relationships with faculty took many paths, but

strikingly many of these relationship building activities happened outside the classroom.

Several students spoke of getting to know faculty outside the formal classroom setting,

outside the faculty office and in numerous cases, off campus. A couple of Turner College

students spoke of a dinner at a faculty member's home.

> We all went to his house and we had [Christmas] dinner together. It was a
> really neat time and all his students from every single one of his classes
> [were there].

Common among many of these examples is the intentionality and significant

effort of the professors to get to know their students in a personal way. Students were

impressed and even surprised that faculty would go to such effort to learn about them, to

know them by name as well as knowing something about their interests and ambitions.

Turner students commented:

> It was worth two percent of our grade that we had to sit in her office with
> her and go on walks with her and just get to know her within the first
> month. I remember about two weeks into class she was able to call out

one of the girls because her cell phone rang. She called her by name!

We were all in the same biology class and our professor made us take pictures with our names and she memorized all our names, all 180 of us and in two weeks! By the end of the two weeks, she knew our names and she knew most about what we wanted to do.

A student at Nile University commented similarly:

The head of the department, Karen, is great with getting to know you and putting you on the right path of what you want to do. You can always be a dancer… or she also has programs where you can do simple therapy and [scientific research]. Actually, she really helped me.

Personal connections and an interest in knowing students were attributed to

administrators as well. One student at Jay College commented:

Even now, [when] I see someone in the finance office, they'll start asking, 'How's your mom doing?' It's … people with the admissions office plus just my friends here. So yeah, it's the people.

Students at Nile University also identified personal connections as being

important to their persistence. One second-year student commented:

I came back because of the connections that I had made here already. I felt like it would have been counterproductive to just lose those. Between friends, professors, and other staff, I had made those connections and those are what got me through the stressful points.

A Turner student added:

Even in our little departments there are communities within them, which makes it seem like even though I am in the dance program, everyone is doing so well with each other and you can go to any professor and [say], 'I need some advice on what to take next semester' and they will help you even if they are not your professor … everyone is very willing to help you even if they do not know you.

Overall, students expressed an appreciation for being cared about by others on

their campus. One Jay College student put it this way:

I can be as well rounded as I want to be here, focusing on friends, academic, and the things I enjoy doing like music. I can be in multiple things and feel comfortable being in them and not feeling like I am not cared about.

A program cited by several students at Jay and Turner Colleges was the freshman seminar course in which freshmen were in class together and often their professor was also their advisor. Students liked the fact that the classes were small so that they got to know their professor/advisor in and out of class. They talked about working on projects together that had nothing to do with the topic of the class. It was a way to bring the faculty and students together in a common mission. They also liked the fact that the course drew together students with a common interest and that enhanced their ability to connect with fellow students. They also expressed appreciation that as part of the course they explored many college resources that they would not otherwise know about. Several Jay students commented on their first-year seminar courses:

> The classes here were very different from high school. In high school we were more lectured to, at least that's how it was in my high school. Here they are more discussion- oriented. Everybody else in your class is in the same boat as you. … You learn about different things that are going on [around] campus. Some [first year seminar] professors make their students go to certain things like the involvement fair. They kind of force you to get involved.

> It's a really good idea, I think, to have one class where you're guaranteed to be with people in the same boat as you. The maximum capacity for those classes is 15 or 16 students.

> My [first term seminar] professor is still my advisor, so that's something in particular. He's like the one faculty in my freshman year that I really connected with and really somehow he convinced me to stay.

Another student spoke of the benefits of her first-year seminar experience at Turner College:

> Even in terms of the people in that class with you, there are some FYS classes where the whole group, because that is your orientation group when you first come in, and some of them can be really close. I remember the one my roommate was in; they were so close- knit that it was who they hung out with. In some you develop these good friendships.

Many students commented on the benefits of freshmen living areas and freshmen seminar courses. Having time with other first-year students provided comfort in being with others facing similar challenges and provided assurance that they could ask questions in a less threatening environment. Jay students especially enjoyed their all-freshmen experiences. According to one student, it's more than just the class itself:

> Not necessarily the class itself, but I loved that it was all freshmen, like I loved being able to go there and just know that we were all on the same page, we were all here in the same position, scared out of our minds. [In contrast], I had a 200-level class my freshman year here and I was scared to ever speak up because I knew I was the only freshman in the class and I just felt like I just screamed freshman too…

One student described the freshman housing as "forced socialization" because they put all freshmen in four halls that are only for freshmen. A Nile student elaborated, saying,

> [I liked the freshman housing] because it didn't let you fall by the side and not make friends and you were just kind of forced to socialize with people and hopefully, that will be a good part of your experience.

While freshmen appreciated time among other first-year students, interactions with upper class students also provided positive impact on first-year students. According to another Nile student:

They kind of take you under their wing, especially with the majors. If you have the same major as somebody, you really get to know them and they kind of help you through your ups and downs and it is really nice, even in clubs or sports, upper classmen are just the role models for you. … If you don't know someone older, you are not going to be able to find out the social life and really know what is going on around you. So, you need to attach yourself to somebody who is older and more experienced and can show you what there is to do on the weekend and you know, how to make it the best time it can be.

Connections with faculty, administrators and other students served to create a supportive, caring environment where students felt they could succeed. A Turner student said:

The biggest impact on me was my relationship with some of the faculty. You can take these really difficult classes and you realize you can dive into this fully and deeply. You are going to office hours a lot and you speak with the professors a lot. Through those interactions you get closer with them. When that happens, it is like you have a support group now [and] it feels a lot better... and you know that you can make it at a school like this.

Of note was the sentiment that fellow students also contributed to the sense of community and support for one another. This was articulated especially well by a student at Turner College.

The vibe of the student body [was most impactful for me]. A lot of other schools there is a sort of air of competitiveness, everyone is out to be the best in their class. In my experience in sciences and math courses I can safely say that, while there are one or two [students] that are sort of to themselves and want to do the best that they can, I can almost guarantee that 99 percent of the students are more than willing to help out and put in their five cents of what they think the answer is. There are rarely any moments where I feel like this person is so much better than all of us in that they do not want to help anyone. If someone is good at a class they are most likely willing to help everyone else instead of competing against each other.

Involvement in campus life. Engagement in campus life is vital to student persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2010; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Students in this study identified numerous ways that involvement in their interests on campus helped them feel part of the campus community and led them to believe they had made the right decision in their college choice. Often, there were aspects of acclimating to college life that were less than ideal or issues that were questioned, but students who engaged strongly in some aspect of campus life were able to overcome their doubts and persist. A female student at Jay College commented:

> … Since I did come in so late, I kind of got the classes that no one else wanted. I was in economics class with the harder professors, and Calculus. I was in super hard one, like it was a 100-level English class but it was so, so hard. I'd ended up doing fine, but I just kind of struggled academically the first semester. Actually I debated transferring because I was super doubtful of the business program here and I actually had my application filled out, but I couldn't imagine leaving my friends here, and so I stuck it out. … I joined a sorority… decided I liked the Econ department and I could do an awesome internship.

Some students articulated the power of having opportunities early on that they had not foreseen. For example, students at Turner spoke at length about the academic resource center and the ability to be tutored and to tutor others. As they described it and as I observed, the center is very inviting to a wide range of students and there was a noted absence of any judgment about using the academic resource center. In fact, it is strategically located in the center of campus, and was a hub of activity on campus. Students came and went and there was a positive energy about it. One student from Turner College was especially enthusiastic about her experience:

… with activities you can go into. I've been working as a tutor. I have been able to really present to somebody like you. I'm really happy just to … show the subjects to another student within [his or her] first year. That's supposed to happen to only sophomores, juniors and seniors that especially you can tutor someone else and really show them how awesome science was or psychology was…

On each campus, it was apparent that faculty had high expectations of students and students wanted to work hard. Generally, students saw their first year as an overall positive experience that they wanted to repeat. Additionally, they anticipated new and more varied experiences such as study away, either on their own or as a group with a professor. A Nile University student was especially articulate in her dreams for the rest of her college experience:

> I want to keep going. I don't only want one year of that, I want three more. I want the best time of my life three more times, even though it's the hardest time of my life. … I can't believe the things I got to accomplish last year and the things I got to experience were things that I need to do again and even though I push myself so hard, especially for classes. I want to do it again.

Several Nile University students spoke of their experiences with study abroad and how travel with professors helps build meaningful relationships:

> I am excited too. Our school, you don't necessarily have to study abroad but you have to have some cultural experience by the time you leave here. It could be something as simple as a trip to D.C. or as much as a trip abroad.

> If you choose not to go individually, the professors will go with you and you will see a side of them that you usually don't see at school and that's always awesome.

All three colleges have strong fine arts programs and many students spoke of involvement in those areas as being especially meaningful. As was mentioned in other

areas, the ability to participate in the arts as freshmen, rather than having to work their

way up to earn the right to be involved, impacted their engagement. A theater student at

Turner commented:

> The idea that the arts program here, you can jump in right away. I know a
> lot of schools I was looking at, [they said] you can't be on the stage the
> first year. … I think being able to be involved, or even just to audition in
> front of these faculty members and not have to wait for four years really
> helps that process along.

A Nile University spoke enthusiastically about her first-year experience with the

theater program:

> Mine [first year] was impacted a lot by my academic major because I am a
> theater major, so once our fall production started, we had four to four-and-
> a-half hour rehearsals every single night, seven days a week, so you spend
> unbelievable amounts of time with the same 30 people so you become best
> friends. … It's a thing that ties you all together.

Some students embraced the liberal arts philosophy wherein they could pursue a

variety of interests without being tied strictly to any one academic area. Students at

Turner College expressed it this way:

> The school is very open to people exploring a lot of different areas and I
> think that stuck out most in my freshman year when I was taking
> beginning courses… the general academic requirements. They may not all
> by my forte, but I think it's really important in expanding my horizons.
>
> I love it that we can take classes in all different areas and not just your
> area. I'm in a[n] arts class that has nothing to do with my majors, but it's
> so much fun... and we can take it for credit.

Food and meals emerged occasionally as a means to socialization on campus. At

Jay, students were especially excited about the food service. They spoke enthusiastically

about both the expanded hours of operation (until 11:00 p.m.) and about the variety and

choices provided by the a la carte option. It seemed that the ability to go in just to get a

piece of fruit or a cup of coffee with friends made it an attractive social gathering place

anytime of the day or evening.

Physical campus and facilities. Overall, students did not mention facilities as an

important factor in their decision to persist at their institution. Even when prompted,

most students had to think for a minute before responding. It seemed that nice facilities

were expected. One Turner student summed it up this way,

> Facilities were not a deciding factor for me. I was really not wowed when
> I came here. As long as the school has everything it needed to function,
> like the science buildings have the equipment needed to do different types
> of experiments and stuff. As long as everything that I needed was here it
> that was pretty much it.

Generally, students in the focus groups like the smaller physical size of their

campus and they viewed that as a means to easily get involved all over campus. Their

familiarity with the whole campus contributed to a sense of comfort that was articulated

repeatedly. Jay students commented:

> I would say it's the bubble that I like most about the physical part of the
> campus. It's a five minute walk across campus. Everything is right here.

> I think the buildings are really nice. The size of the campus is great
> because you can walk everywhere in under ten minutes. That promotes a
> lot of the community feeling, everything is so close.

As students articulated, unlimited or at least extended use of the buildings

provided access to technology and other study aids in addition to a place and atmosphere

conducive to studying, either alone or in groups. Turner College students were especially

appreciative of the access to buildings:

I think the buildings are really wonderful, but it's the accessibility of the buildings. As a [student] researcher I can swipe into the science building 24/7… and there's always someone there. Just being able to get into the buildings and use the classrooms for studying has been super.

I would definitely say the accessibility. .. with science buildings we can study in there at night, not only days and on weekends and not have to worry about finding a place to study because it's no lack at all, and also in these buildings there are computer labs so if you need to print anything, printers are always available, paper and you don't have to worry…

Some students expressed surprise that they had access to even the more

sophisticated types of technology and equipment on campus. Turner College students

expressed an appreciation for the information technology on their campus:

I was going to comment on the technology in our buildings. One of the big differences here is the art facility and the art technology is very updated, [unlike the other colleges I visited]. All of our classrooms have a projector and a callbox, too.

Our first semester in organic chemistry we were able to use the NMR machine which normally, well I've heard at larger schools you don't handle like at our institution… the fact that we are able to do that is just really amazing… We are lucky that Turner put in the time and effort that we can have this knowledge that we wouldn't [normally have] until graduate school. It is very impressive.

Students in the focus groups were candid about buildings they liked as well as

buildings they viewed as state-of-the-art. While having attractive buildings was generally

an expectation of students, it seemed the nicer facilities on campus contributed to their

sense of satisfaction with the campus. In speaking of residential spaces and academic

spaces, their descriptions noted the strong desire for spaces that facilitated the social

interaction they desired. Turner students commented:

We have a really nice science building. There are couches and study spaces and especially the nights before an exam, it's sort of a two-day

event. Almost every classroom will be full of people in our class, so you're a freshman and you knock on the door and go around and people take breaks together and [share] pizza.

At the beginning, as far as living conditions were concerned, I was put off by [my dorm] and I did not enjoy it there. As a sophomore now living in [another dorm] which is much nicer, you have your own bathroom. Once I got to those facilities I felt much better about the whole school in general.

A student at Nile University spoke about the desirable configuration of her residence hall:

I like the educational buildings but I really liked the [room] I had last semester. It was awesome. I got to spend a semester with three other girls and we had a breakfast suite and there was a common room. The toilet was separate from the shower and they had double sinks. My mom and I could have lived there comfortably as an apartment. That's how amazing it was. So, I'm really happy with the dorm buildings. It just makes you feel so much more at home.

Reasons for Student Departure

When asked why students leave the college they entered, students typically had to think before responding and they often mentioned that they did not know many students who left the college. Upon further reflection, several reasons for attrition emerged. Students cited financial reasons, programs that were not available, size of the college, or that for some students it was simply not a good fit between the student and the institution.

Financial. When addressing financial issues as reasons for student departure, focus group participants mentioned that the schools were expensive to begin with and that the tuition increased each year while scholarships and grants did not increase. One Nile University student explained it this way:

That's the thing. We get re-evaluated but not the financial [aid] package. It's difficult too because we have to redo our loans every single year because they are changing the price and that's not the same thing. We can't just go in and say just renew this loan. It's just an obnoxious process [that we have to borrow more every year].

Programs not available/accessible. Some students leave when the connections they want in their college experience are unavailable. For example, when students selected a major that the school did not have, they would have to leave to find it elsewhere. Similarly, students who wanted to play a particular sport but did not make the team left to pursue that athletic dream elsewhere. A Jay College student told of a student he knew who transferred to find a more satisfying opportunity in the music program:

Other than the cost, it is usually that people want to first do something that they can do better somewhere else. I had a friend who was an amazing singer. He was really frustrated because you can't really get into the top choir here as an underclassman. That's changing now but freshmen never could. … It was basically impossible. He was so frustrated with that knowing that he had the talent but wasn't able to first do that.

Students on two of the campuses felt their school was "easier to get in than to stay in" and they wondered if the college was properly evaluating candidates for admission. A Turner student spoke of the importance of feeling connected early on:

They just talked about how they weren't really finding their place or they just weren't really as involved as they wanted to be and they just felt disconnected. But all three of them actually came back this year and are incredibly happier than they were last year. I think if they had just gotten more involved and more active earlier…

In some cases, it was not that students were not capable of the work; rather, they chose not to engage, according to fellow students. One Turner student described it this way,

I know a girl who transferred. She was not a very nice person and I don't think she fit in with the general community here and she also didn't value her academic work very much. I think it was one of the main reasons she left. I think Turner has a really high academic standing and that's one of the reasons that I love it so much. I guess she just didn't care enough to attend classes or try. I think that was the main reason she left, she just didn't fit in.

Not a good fit. A poor fit between some students and the institution can be viewed in various ways. For students on the more rural campuses, the flip side of the attraction of a self-contained small campus which was described as a bubble in and of itself became a drawback over time. Two Turner students gave examples of students who transferred to find a more robust night life:

There is not much to do on campus at night. You can go to a party or something, but beyond the parties it is such a small school that there are not a lot of things on campus to do. If you go to a bigger school, some have movie theaters, bowling alleys, and all of that stuff, and this school really does not have that. There are events, but they are not every weekend and if you don't want to go to a party, it's hard to find something to do.

I had a friend that was transferred. I think she did not get to tour here or really take a look at the life here. I do not think she really was prepared for how small and quiet this kind of campus was or the area was. She ended up going to a [university in a big city]. She wanted a bigger school and she wanted to be closer to a city, just bigger and wilder.

Some students were simply not ready for the challenges facing them in college. They were described as being "challenged too much academically" or were "just lazy or drank too much." Others felt the college they chose was just too far from home and they were homesick and depressed.

At Jay College, students talked about wanting a more economically and racially diverse student body. They discussed the current racial and economic diversity and

concluded that it would be improved if there were more students like them or if those who enrolled were more integrated on campus.

Each campus in this study is a residential campus that requires students to live on campus all four years while enrolled. While guaranteed housing and a residential campus were seen as a benefit at the time of enrollment, some students questioned this policy as upper class students. The inability to move off campus and attain greater independence is seen by some as a limitation. While the majority of students in this study cited this residency policy as an aid to student persistence, some knew a student or two who left because they found the policy too limiting.

When asked about institutional policies, programs and practices that might contribute to student attrition, few themes emerged. This may be a reflection of the fact that not many students on each campus leave between the first and second year. Since the vast majority of the students stay, the respondents knew few, if any, students who left, making it difficult for them to articulate the reasons.

Summary

Students return to their college for many of the same reasons they selected it in the first place. The topic of student persistence in college has been studied by many, with some consistent findings. Students persist for academic and social reasons and engagement in both areas is central to student success and persistence. In these focus groups, size of the institution was important because it was perceived as instrumental in facilitating the sense of community and connections that were so often mentioned.

Students at three ELCA colleges cited involvement in academic and extracurricular programs, a high degree of interaction with faculty and student peers, a strong sense of community, and an environment where their expectations and the reality of their experience were in sync as primary reasons for student persistence. They described their first year in college as stressful and challenging; but with appropriate support to meet those challenges and to overcome the adversities they faced, students enthusiastically chose to return to their colleges.

Put in terms of Astin's model, students chose to return to their college for both input and environmental reasons. Input reasons primarily refer to the academic preparation of the students and to the appropriate fit between the student and the institution. This fit came about by students taking the time to really know the campus community before deciding to enroll there. This intentional and thorough college selection process aligns student expectations with the reality of the student's experience, a factor that is important in student retention in college. Environmental factors identified in this study include both formal and informal ways that students connect with their college. Students cited in-depth connections with faculty in and out of the classroom as well as connections with other students which were often brought together through a common interest such as a campus organization.

Persistence Themes Common to Students, Faculty, and Administrators

A careful review and analysis of interview and focus group transcripts, field notes, and a review of recruitment materials produced several themes identified by faculty, administrators, and students as important to the persistence of students at their

institution. Themes that were common to administrators, faculty, and students on each of the three campuses include a sound student-institution fit, a strong sense of community and meaningful relationships, a challenging and supportive environment, first-year programs that facilitate student learning and adjustment to college, and student engagement in and out of the classroom.

A sound student-institution fit. Students, faculty and administrators on all three campuses articulated the importance of a good student-institution fit as an essential element of student persistence. Students gave numerous examples of how they came to find the college or university that matched them best in terms of size, setting, services, academic and co-curricular programs, peers and general campus ethos. They determined this fit by doing their homework and getting to know the campus as best they could. They described campus visits, talking with students (current and prospective), alumni, faculty, coaches, and professionals such as teachers and doctors who knew about the college.

Surprisingly, students, faculty and administrators rarely mentioned the ELCA faith based mission as important in the selection or persistence at their college. The recruitment materials for each college do mention the affiliation with the Lutheran church. According to *The 2010 ELCA Colleges and Universities Trends Analysis* (2010), in 2009, the percent of full-time Lutheran students on these three campuses ranged from 6% to nearly 50%. Additionally, while church-relatedness was not specifically mentioned, manifestations of the relationship with the ELCA, such as chapel services, faith in general, and community service were mentioned.

From the institutional perspective, numerous faculty and administrators elaborated on the importance of enrolling students whose interests, aptitudes and abilities matched what the college offers and they stressed the importance of being as transparent as possible in marketing the college to prospective students. Mr. Cooper best articulated this theme as he stressed the importance of honesty in recruitment, even if doing so resulted in not enrolling a student who was interested in Jay College:

> You know within enrollment, a lot of it is being honest, up front with people and we try and reach out in material, in our conversations and be very honest from a financial standpoint and in some ways that sometimes pushes away some people who probably would have stepped away later on. So that honesty, while it makes it a little bit difficult to enroll up front, probably helps us with persistence down the line and that's something, again, following his steps through the years, it's something this college has done for decades and it's been easy to do that.

Mr. Swanson elaborated, adding that the combination of enrolling students who best fit the institution and providing the environment they expect is a powerful piece of achieving student satisfaction and persistence. He summarized it this way:

> …while inputs are really important and fit is really important, the environment is the reinforcement that keeps the kids here. Hopefully, we're making smart decisions when we admit them but if we admitted them into a place that was totally different from Turner, the door would spin and they'd be right back out of here in three semesters. Once they get here there's got to be an environment that reinforces all of the things that we believe are important as we're admitting them.

Aligning student expectations with the reality of their experience was clearly a factor in student persistence at Jay College, Nile University, and Turner College. Students, administrators and faculty gave examples of students who left their institution because there was an academic, financial or social disconnect between the institution and the student. Students who achieved the "best fit" persist while those who do not are

likely to leave.

Sense of community and meaningful relationships. As students, faculty, and administrators described a good fit between student and institution, they consistently spoke of a strong community and relationships that defined community for them. Relationships tended to be deep and relationships that matter were found between students and peers (other first-year students and upper class students), between students and faculty, students and admission counselors, coaches, choir and theater directors, and campus employers. Additionally, strong relationships among faculty and administrators emerged as an element that helped facilitate the desired community for students. Faculty and administrators who know and trust each other tend to work together more closely and form a web into which students fit. Dr. Wilson at Jay College defined the essence of community when he said, "When it comes to working with the students, once they're here, it's all personal touch."

When people genuinely care about each other, there is a natural respect for others. This means that students respect each other enough to help them and to receive help from them and faculty respect students enough to seek their opinion about campus happenings. Jay College and Turner College faculty, administrators and students spoke specifically about the caring aspect of their campuses. Recruitment materials for Jay and Turner Colleges describe the benefits of having a respectful community. All three colleges stress the importance of working closely with faculty and with other students on their campus. Dr. Jones from Jay College articulated this sense of community found on all three campuses:

So I think a strong sense of community, a strong sense of being helpful
and of people knowing that they can ask for assistance if they feel like
they are struggling or that there is lots of outreach to students, very one-
on-one, like what I would call high touch, but coming from this place that
is, I don't know how to [say it], it's organic. It's not a 'Here's a retention
strategy that we're going to put in place.' It comes from the idea that it's a
community of people who care about people.

The need for a high level of respect was mentioned several times in conversations

with faculty, administrators and sometimes by students. Professor Nielsen described this

sense of respect at Nile University:

…were the teachers that mattered and it's valuing the student opinion and
respecting students… Respecting right?   Respecting students; I think
those things are all tied in and I guess that's probably the last thing I can
say.

Community is articulated clearly on college websites. According to the Turner

College website,

The Turner experience is characterized by a deep sense of community and
connection, intense student-faculty relationships and collaboration; small
classes; passionate teaching and active learning; and powerful outcomes in
terms of graduate school and entry-level career placement.

Similarly, the Jay College mission statement refers to its guiding core values of

community, excellence, faith, justice, and service. It continues:

Jay has always prized community. Civility, mutual respect, cooperation,
shared governance, and a pervasive sense of concern for every member of
the Jay community are hallmarks of the College. Freedom to express a
broad range of ideas is central to our sense of community … The College
aspires to be a community of persons from diverse backgrounds who
respect and affirm the dignity of all people. It is a community where a
mature understanding of the Christian faith and lives of service are
nurtured and students are encouraged to work toward a just and peaceful
world.

Turner College articulates its sense of community in a slightly different way. On its website, it describes connections as essential to a close community:

> Turner professors are experts in their fields. They conduct cutting-edge research, publish books and papers, are quoted in the media, present at conferences, and win awards. But ask them what's most important and they most often say, "teaching." … In fact, our professors are the force behind our unmatched connectivity.

Mr. Swanson felt strongly that developing a sense of community at Turner has been intentional, that it does not simply happen. However, when intentional and pervasive across campus, this sense of community can be powerful:

> It's not just Admissions and the President talking about community but a lot of other administrators, faculty, students. … And so, that makes a real difference, just the fact it's a place that talks out loud about what does it mean really to be a community that operates like a community it's really important. … There's a degree of intentionality that is very important. And it manifests itself then across the campus.

He elaborated on the importance of building strong relationships from the start for students, even before their official enrollment. This is particularly important for students who enter the college when it was not his or her first choice. Interestingly, students did not talk about whether the college they attended was their first choice or not. Developing strong relationships and a sense of community early on can help students shift their choice so that they persist rather than transferring to their original top choice college:

> a big part of the goal from the day that a student gets admitted to Turner until the day they graduate is a lot of us work very hard to help them develop a sense of real relationship with the college that they're a part of so, doing things that we hope in the aggregate all together will really serve to bind those students to us. And I think some of the hardest to sell are those kids who wait right up until May 1st to send in their deposits. They may be sitting on a wait-list at the [large state university] or [one of the ivy colleges] or some place and they really see themselves at a college

that's in the very first rank academically of American colleges. For some of those kids Turner may feel initially like a little bit of a come down…. so they may be feeling a little bit stung emotionally when they end up at Turner and the good news is now most of those kids do stay with us and graduate from Turner.

The concept of community was not only articulated repeatedly on each campus, it is also repeated many times on their websites. For example, in describing the guiding values at Nile University, the website describes its sense of community in a variety of ways:

> Nile University is … a learning *community* that values diversity; intellectual collaboration among faculty and students; scholarship and research; health in mind, body and spirit; and learning in and out of the classroom, a working *community* that recognizes its faculty and staff as its greatest resource, values cooperation, and expects ethical behavior and mutual respect from all its members, a responsible *community* committed to financial stability, good stewardship, and a pragmatic and ambitious approach to its work, a valuable resource serving the local *community* and region, while engaging in the larger world through strong urban and international connections, … a *community* that expresses its Lutheran heritage through the free and open exploration of ideas, commitment to service, development of individual talents, and the welcoming of individuals of all backgrounds and beliefs.

The unique sense of community at these three campuses is created in a variety of ways both in and out of the classroom. The smaller size of the colleges certainly facilitates the opportunities for high levels of engagement and interaction among students, faculty, and administrators. Professor Nielsen at Nile University expressed this sentiment most aptly:

> What came up over and over again was that the experience of the small discussion-oriented classroom impacted their way of thinking about learning, thinking about themselves, thinking about their relationship with their teachers …[whether in a] literature [class or in a] science [course],what struck me so much and it came up several times in these

testimonies was: something magical takes place in the classroom; the undergraduate liberal arts classroom that's sort of formatted on the Socratic method.

A challenging and supportive environment. Jay and Turner are highly selective colleges and Nile is a selective university, according to their websites. Each clearly enrolls students with above average academic achievement in high school. Each provides great academic challenge for its students. They each also express a strong desire to help their students meet and exceed the demands set before them upon enrollment. According to the Nile University website,

> Academic studies at Nile are substantive, and students are challenged. But we also provide resources and support systems to help students succeed. Nile's size and culture invite students to be active participants in their education. As members of a community committed to teaching and learning, partners in academic support and success are numerous and include faculty, staff and fellow students.

Jay and Turner Colleges articulated the desire for their students to become lifelong learners and to cultivate the academic and life skills necessary to achieve that goal. According to the Turner College website,

> The Learning Resource Center endeavors to assist students in their efforts to successfully navigate the rigors of competitive higher education and to become lifelong learners. This includes providing opportunities to develop independent critical thinking, learn to express ideas with clarity, cultivate resilience, develop self-awareness and independence, strengthen commitment to academic pursuits, and learn better study habits.

Part of what makes these campuses supportive is that faculty members know their students and take a personal interest in them. They serve as a "guide by the side" rather than a "sage on the stage." Dr. Spencer explained how this unfolds at Turner College:

One of the things you need to know about Turner is you're not just a number here; you're a person. He was explaining that this was not a school he was initially looking to attend, and when he met with one of our admissions counselors, she kind of made the pitch right, that it would be a good experience for him, and he ended up coming here, and he's actually our first Neuroscience/Bio Chem dual major, and he said one of the things that was important to him was, 'I wasn't a number. I was a person here. People know who I am. Faculty take the time to get to know students.'

In describing how campuses can be supportive of students, some faculty, administrators and students referred to the facilities or campus physical environment as being thoughtfully designed so that they are supportive of student learning. Dean Mann at Nile University put it this way:

I think it is important for students to feel like their quality of life on campus is up to some standard. … It's a downer for students when the place that they live is in shambles, or the place where they go to class or the place where they eat. So, yes, I do think that the quality of the campus is important.

The idea that students should be both challenged and supported in order to be successful – and to persist – in college was an important theme in conversations with students, faculty and administrators. Support comes in many forms. It stems from both formal programs and informal relationships. It is a natural extension of the strong relationships formed with faculty and peers. Programs designed specifically with first-year students in mind are a key element in providing appropriate support to students in the transition from high school to college. The next section explores first-year programs at the institutions in my study.

First-year programs that facilitate learning and adjustment. Viewing the first year of college as a time of transition is important to student adjustment to every aspect

of college life. Each of these three colleges views this first year as a time during which

students need to develop and/or enhance the skills necessary to successfully navigate

college, such as learning, testing and study skills, coping skills (with stress, with difficult

situations), and interpersonal and conflict resolution skills (to help with dealing with a

problematic roommate situation, for example).

These three colleges offered myriad programs and people to ensure a smooth

transition. Peers are available in residence halls and in tutoring and advising sessions.

Turner University faculty and administrators spoke with pride about their nationally

recognized peer tutoring program and the Turner website offers:

> For entering students, there is a nationally recognized, year-long
> Orientation program. Our peer tutoring program has received national
> recognition. A campus-wide initiative has been to articulate and live the
> importance of academic integrity, also receiving national recognition as a
> program of excellence.

Freshman housing and all-freshman courses offer settings where new students can

freely interact and explore issues unique to new members of the community. Professor

Connor described this concept at Jay College:

> I can't imagine being a first year student in a place like this without us
> committing to that type of program. Because if we were just to throw in
> first year students into Econ 101 with maybe some first year students, but
> also other people, they wouldn't feel this freedom to ask questions that
> only first year students would ask. Like my roommate is driving me nuts,
> he's smoking cigarettes. Should I tell people about this or am I going to
> upset him so much I have to worry about a future relationship? Things
> that bug them, that really do bug them.

Faculty members are available as professor/mentors and as advisors. Two of the

campuses offered courses to first-year students where the professor also served as the

advisor. The Jay College website offers an explanation of the many ways this experience

is beneficial to new students:

> In a small, highly interactive class with a focus on "values," students will
> work with a full-time faculty member to develop the skills essential to
> academic and civic life: critical thinking, oral communication, and writing.
> The faculty member teaching the First-Term Seminar will also serve as the
> students' advisor, helping students plan their liberal arts education and
> introducing them to campus resources.

This professor as advisor model also allows faculty to get to know their students

quickly and holistically and the faculty/mentor is then in a position to alert someone in

the community if a student needs to connect with other campus resources. This early

alert program was described by Dr. Finch at Nile University:

> …there's a sense of community. If something is wrong with somebody
> who is in your community, somebody notices. The early alert system, the
> student support network are just ways of formalizing and making sure that
> we have good communication through this community, but that's basically
> what it boils down to is, it's community.

All three campuses offered visible learning and academic resource centers. The

third campus had an entire office dedicated to the first-year experience. The Nile website

describes this office:

> Nile is dedicated to ensuring that students have a positive and productive
> transition to university life. In addition to overseeing an array of entry
> experiences, the Office of First-Year Programs works with campus
> departments to identify students who require additional support and
> provide them with helpful direction and resources.

Clearly, significant focus has been given to first year students and their successful

adjustment to college. As a result, these campuses have strong support programs in their

classrooms and in their residence halls, bringing almost all of their campus community

into partnership for the benefit of their students. The next section describes the

importance of not simply providing such programs but in creating an environment in which new students are highly engaged.

Student engagement in and out of the classroom. When describing students who leave their campuses, students, faculty and administrators could cite at least one student who left because he or she failed to become part of the welcoming community or who failed to use appropriate support services or who did not become engaged in the life of the campus. A key to successful retention is both providing ways for students to be engaged and to encourage them to do so. Turner College's dean of academic life articulates this need for engagement on the college website:

> As Dean of Academic Life, I am committed to working with faculty, students and staff to build and sustain the most engaged learning and teaching environment possible. I want students to be empowered in their learning and supported by the College as they follow their passions and make every moment count.

Jay College embraces the idea that engagement happens in many ways, in many places on campus, and that opportunities cover virtually every aspect of a student's college life. The college website describes life at Jay this way:

> At Jay, we emphasize that every experience you have in college has the potential to be a learning opportunity. That's why we strive to ensure that you can select from a variety of exceptional opportunities - personal, global, cultural, social, spiritual, intellectual, athletic, musical, artistic, and those that are just plain fun - that will shape your life and create your 'home away from home'.

While each campus has its own "signature programs" for student involvement, it is more about being involved and being passionate about something than it is about specific programs. Put another way, in order for involvement to matter in student

persistence, quality supersedes quantity. According to some faculty and administrators,

connections that come through passion for and involvement in campus activities are key.

Mr. McDonald addressed this when he said:

> We have all kinds of service-oriented clubs and organizations that they can
> join and become a part of. From my perspective it is not what they are
> doing as long as it is something that is productive somehow, but that it is
> something that they feel connected to. They contribute, they're connected,
> they feel a part of something and they feel that they belong and the sooner
> they start to see Nile as their new home, the less likely they are to keep on
> pining for their friends at home or their family or others, wherever they
> left to come to Nile. … I would just say that the culture of involvement
> and engagement that we have, that is a must have. There are a variety of
> things for them to be involved in, but also just kind of the community
> expectation that you get involved. Students who do that are the ones who
> thrive.

In selecting a college, students dream of discovering and following their passions.

Some enroll with a strong sense of those passions: a love of a particular academic

discipline such as science or history, or love of a sport such as basketball, or love of an

art such as dance, theater or music, or love of service to others or simply a passion for

leadership. Others enter without such a strong sense of their path, yet with openness to

discovering what they can become. Success, or persistence in college, comes from the

institution offering a variety of meaningful ways for students to be involved and with a

nurturing community to help them engage at the highest levels. To ensure a good fit, it is

also incumbent upon the student to engage and to take advantage of opportunities

available. As Professor Nielsen articulated, students and parents have high expectations

of college:

> From a student point of the view they want the whole package. They want
> comfort right, they want – parents might think it's most important about

academic programs and job placement. If you have a prospective parent
they're looking for certain things. If you have a prospective student
they're often looking for something different. But they really want the
whole package, they want the theatre and music programs to be topnotch,
they want the performing facilities to be fine, they want sports and athletic
workout rooms, they want available dining options, they want WIFi
everywhere.

Summary

This research identifies three colleges and universities with stronger than expected

first-to-second year retention. Each of these institutions is intentional about ensuring a

sound student-institution fit and each provides a strong sense of community with

meaningful relationships. Additionally, they offer an environment that is both challenging

and supportive, first-year programs that facilitate student learning and adjustment to

college, and their successful students are strongly engagement in and out of the

classroom.

The next chapter provides a summary of the study, a discussion of key findings,

and recommendations for higher education practitioners and for researchers who wish to

contribute to the study of retention.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study and implications of its findings. The summary presents the context and purpose of the study, the research questions and the methods used to identify key findings. This chapter offers conclusions drawn from this study and recommendations for colleges and universities who seek to improve first-to-second year retention rates. Finally, researcher observations and recommendations for future study are discussed.

Summary of the Study

Context

Student persistence in college is one of the most studied topics in higher education. Even as higher education opportunities have flourished and as an increasing portion of the 18-22-year old population seeks post-secondary education, fewer students graduate from the college they initially enter (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). This poses problems for students and their parents, for institutions of higher education, and for greater society. As thought leaders have recently emphasized, it is the *attainment*, rather than the *initial access* to higher education, that is important to the United States in maintaining its status as a world power (Bowen et al., 2009).

It is well documented that college graduates have greater lifetime earning power than do college dropouts or high school graduates (Baum, Payea, & Steele, 2005; Bowen et al., 2009). Therefore, the attainment of a college degree is highly desirable for students. In fact, with 66% of students incurring debt to attend college (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), obtaining a college degree becomes increasingly important to ensure that graduates are able to seek employment at levels that enable them to repay their loans. Aside from greater earning power, leaving college (even to attend another college or university) can create emotional stress and can add to the time it takes to complete an undergraduate degree (Milem, 1997). For parents who invest in their child's education, a lack of persistence can result in financial difficulties as well.

For colleges and universities, strong retention and graduation rates are essential to achieving strategic goals and to maintaining vibrant and fiscally sound institutions. Private colleges are traditionally tuition-driven and as such, they rely on student enrollment for fiscal health. Student attrition results in lower revenue and poses risks for necessary investments in programs and in people who teach and provide services to students (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1991). This study indicates that investing in faculty and staff who value a high level of interaction with students and who genuinely care about the success of their students is important to student persistence. Investments in programs and facilities that promote student engagement also positively impact student persistence. A cycle of recruitment, institutional improvement, and greater retention helps create a strong college. Healthy student recruitment provides resources for institutional investments designed to enhance

the student experience. This enhancement of the experience results in greater persistence of students and produces further revenues that can be funneled into the college experience. The alternate cycle in which a lack of sufficient investment in the student experience results in low persistence and enrollment and a greater lack of investment is a formula for institutional peril.

The ultimate goal is for students to graduate from the colleges and universities they enter. For colleges, the graduation rate is a mark of institutional success. However, the greatest student attrition for most colleges occurs between the first and second years (ACT, 2010; Bowen et al., 2009; Lee & Rawls, 2010). As a result, many studies on student retention and persistence focus on the period between the initial fall enrollment and subsequent enrollment at the same institution a year later (McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Fike & Fike, 2008; Morris, Beck, & Mattis, 2007; Seidman, 2005; Stillman, 2009; Tinto, 1993). This study adds to the research about this important year for students.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to explore factors that help colleges achieve higher than predicted first- to-second year retention rates. More specifically this study seeks to apply Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) model to identify the institutional *environmental* characteristics that are present on three Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) college campuses with higher than expected first-to-second year retention rates. In light of this purpose, this study pursues the following questions:

1. At three ELCA institutions, what specific programs, policies, and/or activities do

faculty and administrators believe may contribute to higher than predicted first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates and to attrition among first-year students?

2. At three ELCA institutions, what programs, policies, and/or activities do second-year students believe may contribute to first-to-second year student persistence and to attrition among undergraduate, first-year students?

3. What practices, policies, and/or programs do selected ELCA institutions appear to share in common that may contribute to higher levels of first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates?

Methods Used

This study is based on a case-study design in which views of students, faculty and administrators on three Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) college campuses are investigated. The three colleges examined in this case study were Jay College, Nile University, and Turner College. Enrollments at these undergraduate institutions range from 2000 to 2500 fulltime students. These institutions were selected as cases for study because their actual first-to-second year retention rates between 1999 and 2008 were both consistently and significantly greater than their expected first-to-second year retention rates. One-on-one interviews with faculty and administrators and focus groups with students were the main means for data collection. Researcher observations and a review of recruitment materials also provided data for this study. The goal was to gain an understanding of programs, policies and other factors in the campus environment that are thought to impact student persistence at these colleges.

Data analysis included a careful review of the interview and focus group transcripts as well as researcher notes and observations, and web and recruitment materials. Themes were identified and explored in light of the research questions. Triangulation of the data from all sources and including literature relevant to first-to-second year retention contributes to the "development of converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2009, p. 115), and aids in the development of findings that are both convincing and accurate.

Key Findings

This study seeks to understand environmental factors found on three ELCA college campuses whose first-to-second year student retention rates are better than expected. The first research question of this study asks "What specific programs, policies, and/or activities do faculty and administrators believe may contribute to higher than predicted first-to-second year persistence rates among undergraduates and to attrition among first-year students?" Key findings reveal that students persist because of a strong fit between the institution and its students. Here, fit is defined by the degree to which student characteristics and opportunities offered by the institution are compatible so that the student uses the available college resources, is successful, and persists. William Ihlanfeldt (in Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1991) refers to factors he calls "exogenous influences" (p. 192) that help define a good fit between a student and an institution. Levels of ability, geographical distribution, and socioeconomic class are among the variables that influence fit, according to Ihlanfeldt. Astin (1993) is likely to categorize such variables as inputs because they are characteristics students bring with

them to college.

Additionally, these three small faith-based colleges each provide a strong sense of community in which students build meaningful relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. Policies, programs, and activities are available to help students flourish academically and socially. Students who do not fit the institution, due to academic or social reasons, are among the few students who fail to persist.

The finding that was especially surprising to this researcher had to do with institutional strategies for retention. At Jay and Turner Colleges, where they have enjoyed stable and strong first-to-second year retention rates, there was no stated institutional goal regarding retention of students. Nor did either of these campuses have an employee whose primary responsibility was to oversee retention efforts. In contrast, a recent decline in first-to-second year retention rates at Nile University prompted it to undertake a two-year campus-wide study to better understand persistence and attrition of students at Nile. At the time of the data gathering for this study, senior administrators were in the process of analyzing the results and creating a structure to address issues identified in the study. Their intent was to add a position whose primary responsibility would be to affect institutional change to improve retention. This finding led to an interesting observation. The two colleges that are performing strongly seem to focus on student success rather than on retention while the college that seeks to regain its stronger first-to-second year retention and graduation rates is primarily focused on retention, with student success conversations a means to achieve desired retention rates.

The second research question of this study asks "What programs, policies, and/or

activities do second-year students believe may contribute to first-to-second year student persistence and to attrition among undergraduate, first-year students?" Key findings reveal that students who feel a strong sense of connection to the campus are likely to persist. Strong connections with faculty and with fellow students, (particularly with freshmen peers who share common experiences), appear to have the most impact on persistence. In fact, having strong connections early on may serve to balance obstacles that students encounter as they transition to college life. An academic experience that is both rigorous and supportive is also a key to success at these institutions.

The third research question of this study asks "What practices, policies, and/or programs do selected ELCA institutions appear to share in common that may contribute to higher levels of first-to-second year persistence among undergraduates?" Key findings reveal that both students and faculty at the institutions examined in this study found a friendly, supportive, and engaging community to be essential to student persistence. The size of these institutions was regarded as an asset in creating the desired community, in part because of the low student-to-faculty ratios. Out of the size and sense of community come a variety of programs to engage students in meaningful ways. It is important to note that there was no "one size fits all" community. Each of these campuses has its own unique and distinctive sense of community and each seems to understand the importance of enrolling not just high achieving students but students whose understanding, experiences, and expectations best match those of the institution. Students who persist also seem to understand and embrace the culture of the campus they joined.

The next section provides conclusions based on the key findings with a discussion based on relevant student persistence literature.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this section, five conclusions based on the key findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and to the literature reviewed for the study. First, retention of students in college is complex. There is no "silver bullet" that leads to high retention on every campus. Second, retention is largely a factor of aligning student characteristics and expectations with the reality of the experience. This involves knowing, accepting and presenting every aspect of the campus as it is today, not as campus leaders may wish it to be in the future or as alumni recall it from years past. Third, students who persist are those who are strongly and actively connected to their campus. Fourth, a strong sense of community is important to the persistence of students who enroll at small colleges. Finally, achieving stronger than predicted retention rates requires that senior campus leaders value a culture of continuous assessment and improvement aimed at student success.

Retention is Complex

College and university leaders across the country desire strong graduation rates and many know they need to address retention from year-to-year in order to achieve those desired rates. Particular attention is given to first-year students because they are the most likely to leave (ACT, 2010; Bowen et al., 2009). The challenge is to identify the most rewarding ways to invest limited resources in order to achieve greater student persistence on a particular campus. Even leaders at the institutions in this study, institutions with

first-to-second year retention rates among the highest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

in America (ELCA) colleges, were challenged to identify key reasons for high retention.

They identified numerous reasons they thought were factors, but it was clear from the

way they responded that they could articulate *contributing factors* but not one or two

determining factors. Further, while they articulated similar themes, such as a sense of

community, student engagement in and out of the classroom, and a supportive and

challenging environment, the ways they achieved these factors were varied. In his work

with Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) colleges, Kuh (2005) also

cautions that there is no single path for student success and persistence. Like the ELCA

colleges in this study, DEEP colleges share similar practices and policies, yet they take

different paths to get there. At some DEEP colleges, the curriculum is the centerpiece for

promoting student success, while at other colleges out-of-class activities enhance student

learning most effectively.

To apply Astin's I-E-O (1993) model, numerous input and environmental factors

exist, all of which impact, to varying degrees, the output of retention. Characteristics

students bring with them to college include a vast array of factors such as academic,

social, psychological, and financial dynamics (Abrahamson, 2009; Cambiano, Denny, &

DeVore, 2000; Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009; Dey & Astin, 1993, Murtaugh, Burns,

& Schuster, 1999). College environments include an equally vast array of opportunities

and potential experiences for students (Davidson, Hall, & Milligan, 2009; Habley &

McClanahan, Kuh, 2005; 2004; Tinto, 1993). In considering the student-institution fit

and the resulting student persistence, it is no wonder that colleges must work hard to

identify characteristics that matter and align them in ways that achieve student success and persistence. Further, students and collegiate institutions are dynamic. It is a challenge to keep a strong fit when both the student and the institution continuously change. The fact that there are multiple ways for colleges to achieve stronger than predicted retention rates is good news but also it validates the complexity of the task.

Aligning Student Characteristics and Expectations with Reality

Achieving strong retention requires students to make informed, thoughtful decisions about their college choice in light of numerous factors important to them, such as distance from home, desired level of interaction with others, desired academic rigor, fit with peers and professors, possible academic and career paths, and extra-curricular programs of interest to them. In order for students to make an informed decision, the college or university must present the college experience as accurately as possible in its publications, on its website, in videos and in presentations.

It is also helpful to provide a variety of ways for prospective students to interact as deeply as possible with individuals with whom they will share the college experience, such as faculty, coaches, choir and band directors, and of course, fellow students. Noel and Levitz (1991) agree with the need for a strong student-institution fit, stating "…the extent to which individual student differences successfully mesh with the institutional offerings is the extent to which a fit has been achieved and a given student will be successful, satisfied, and persist at a given institution" (p. 359).

Little retention research exists to address how recruitment practices impact retention. Ihlanfeldt (in Noel, Letitz, & Saluri, 1993) also asserts that there is much that

admission offices can contribute to improving retention by recruiting the "best-fit" (p. 192) students. Recruitment plans that target students known to persist can reduce costs, increase efficiency, and improve yield and retention. For example, the ELCA colleges in this study attract students with a strong interest in colleges that provide high levels of faculty-student interaction. According to Ihlanfeldt, these colleges would not be well served by enrolling students who prefer a more anonymous student-faculty interaction because they would not likely persist in the high interaction environment. Ihlanfeldt cautions college leaders, however, that there is a balance to be achieved between targeting students who are likely to persist and allowing for diversity on a given campus.

Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler (1995) found that when expectations formed by prospective students prior to enrollment were met, students were more likely to persist and graduate. Additionally, Hamrick and Hossler (1996) found that high school students who had greater access to information about colleges later reported greater satisfaction with the colleges in which they enrolled. These studies suggest that helping students align their expectations with the reality of the experience impacts retention positively.

Many factors are possible in aligning student expectations with the reality of a given campus experience. This fit is best achieved when both students and institutions are intentional about the college recruitment and enrollment process. Students (and their parents) are best served by actively gaining an understanding of the culture of the campuses they are considering. Once that knowledge is in hand, they are wise to make a college choice based on all the factors available. Higher education institutions can facilitate the "best fit" by presenting the college to prospective students in the most

honest and transparent ways possible. Sewanee, for example, emphasizes intellectual challenge in its admissions publications and during campus interviews. These messages are reinforced throughout orientation, from pre-orientation programs through the First Year Program (Kuh et al., 2005).

Strong and Active Connections/Engagement

Many examples of engagement were identified by students, faculty and administrators on these three campuses. Relationships with admission staff, professors, advisors, upper class students and with other first-year students were among those most identified as important. Often, these relationships were holistic in the sense that the college employee and the student came to know each other beyond that which brought them together. Students spoke of faculty or staff members remembering them personally and asking about the student's family or about a particular situation the student may have mentioned.

Students also were engaged in their college experience through a variety of programs across campus. Each student seemed to have at least one area of passion in which they participated. This participation led to stronger relationships with college employees such as coaches, hall directors, and faculty as well as with other students who shared the same interest. Athletics and fine arts were among the top areas in which students engaged on these campuses. Music and dance, in particular, appeared to be popular among students on these ELCA campuses, perhaps in part due to the church affiliation of these colleges. Noel and Levitz (1991) offer numerous examples and case studies of colleges with different but successful programs. They note that "merely

grafting strategies and approaches from one campus to another will most likely lead to frustration and disappointment" (p. 402). The case studies they present illustrate how retention efforts on campuses tend to grow out of specific concerns or to build on specific successes on each campus with strong first-to-second year persistence rates. Among the cases are examples of campuses that intentionally increase the number of campus jobs for students, or build a strong music program in which nearly half of the students participate, advising programs, peer tutoring programs, career guidance centers, and leadership intern programs. Regardless of the approach each campus took, the intent was to engage students who might not otherwise be engaged had the program not been instituted.

Students also spoke of connections made during various orientation programs and with peer mentors. Orientation is largely viewed as an important step in acculturating and welcoming students to their chosen new home and need not be limited to the first few days upon arrival in the fall (Boyer, 1987; Kuh et al., 2005; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Most current practitioners think of orientation more broadly as that time between the student's decision to attend and continuing through the first year. Essential elements of orientation include teaching students the values, history, and traditions of their college, setting appropriate expectations for academic and student life, helping students get to know one another socially, and helping them learn about the community in which the college is situated (Boyer, 1987; Kuh et al., 2005).

Peer mentors were typically found in academic tutoring or residential housing programs. Generally, peer tutors report that the program is helpful to them in addition to being helpful to first-year students as they find their way academically (Kuh et al., 2005).

Since most of the students interviewed in my study were second-year students, they had

not yet had opportunities to study abroad or to undertake research with faculty, but

students mentioned these were activities they anticipated. Faculty members did mention

study abroad, research, and community service as ways to engage students on these

campuses. Internships, undergraduate research, service to society, and study abroad are

powerful student engagement opportunities found at DEEP schools (Kuh et al., 2005). In

fact, according to NSSE national norms, in 2005 about 25% of all undergraduates

participate in research projects with a faculty member. At most DEEP schools, the

percentage was higher. Some DEEP schools felt so strongly about its importance that

they went so far as to require undergraduate research for some students.

In Astin's (1993) model, any programs that enhance the experience of the

students who enroll serve to produce greater than expected retention. Campuses that give

thoughtful consideration to the students they enroll and who strengthen the environment

by offering a variety of programs to engage their students are likely to have stronger than

expected retention and graduation rates.

Sense of Community

Community is created by students feeling connected but also by an intentionality

of faculty and administrators to be connected to one another. Kuh et al. (2005) addresses

the need for connecting students to each other and to their college. His work with the

DEEP colleges provides many examples of ways in which campus rituals and traditions

can bond students. Such rituals and traditions are especially powerful if done early in the

student's experience because they serve to instill and deepen new students' commitment

to the college.

The overall college sense of community is difficult to measure and assess (Astin, 1993). Astin suggests that size is often a proxy for community and that the climate at small colleges is likely to be characterized by a strong sense of community more than the climate at larger institutions. Astin provides an example of studies conducted by C. Robert Pace in the early 1960s at UCLA in which a scale measuring the degree of community on a given campus was measured. Over the years this College and University Environmental Scale has evolved to include other measurements of community and student engagement in the community.

Generally, the more interaction students have with faculty, the better, in terms of creating the desired campus climate, student learning, and persistence (Kuh et al., 2005). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is the most widely used tool to determine levels of meaningful student-faculty interaction.

A strong sense of community was described as a centerpiece of student life at all three ELCA campuses in this study. As students, faculty, and administrators described the community on their campus, their examples of how it played out were vast. The factors that seemed to build their own brand of community included strong and active connections and engagement and a strong student-institution fit. The strong sense of community seemed more a by-product of the central connections, engagement and fit, found on these campuses.

Leadership and Continuous Assessment/Improvement

> Student success becomes an institutional priority when leaders make it so.
> —Kuh et al., 2005, p. 270

Interviews with faculty and administrators on each of the three ELCA campuses identified the need for, and appreciation of, clear direction from college leaders. Senior officers were identified as responsible for setting campus-wide expectations that put success of their students at the forefront of decisions. Senior leaders also defined the need for continuous assessment of programs and practices and for on-going improvement where needed. Kuh at al. (2005) refers to this as "positive restlessness" (p. 146) where the community operates under the assumption that what it is doing now can be improved if the institution remains focused on the quality of its work and its impact on student success. A positive restlessness definitely existed on these three ELCA campuses. To use Kuh's et al. description, they did not seem to desire being like any other institutions; they simply wanted to be the best they can be.

Astin (1993) asserts that there are two important parts to assessment. The first has to do with gathering of information and measurement of progress. While the first part is a necessary first step, the second part is most essential and exciting to institutions and students. It involves the utilization of the information for institutional or individual improvement. At Turner College, there was an especially high level of assessment in the enrollment management office. Mr. Swanson described in some detail the process of eliciting feedback from students on the college marketing and messaging designed to attract new students. They continuously ask enrolled students if the messaging accurately

portrays the student experience at Turner and they enthusiastically make changes as necessary.

Most of the conversation about the need for strong leadership at the ELCA colleges referred to the president and the president's cabinet. Examples were offered citing presidents who walked around campus, encouraging open doors among faculty. Additionally, faculty and sometimes deans were described as modeling the behavior they sought to encourage on their campuses. Kuh et al. (2005) offers a slightly expanded view, citing the importance of strong leadership among faculty and he offers numerous examples of programs that matter on the DEEP campuses that were introduced by faculty. Clearly, creating a campus community that is inclusive, welcoming, and which encourages the kind of engagement that matters to student success requires people who truly care, from the president down.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Senior Leaders

This study is helpful to senior leaders, both academic and student affairs personnel and enrollment officers. Senior leaders set the tone across campus for a decision-making process that values a sense of community that leads to student success. It is also important for senior leaders to encourage discussion across divisional lines about programs, policies and facilities. As the institution's primary connection to prospective students, it is wise, for example, to include enrollment officers in detailed discussions about academic and student life initiatives. Doing so will increase the chances for aligning student expectations and reality.

It is important for a campus to have a clear understanding of its ethos and to try hard not to be all things to all people. In knowing who it is and what it does best, a campus community can best position its students to persist. The DEEP schools, for example, became high- performing institutions because they "were advantaged by having people at the institution who worked on one or more initiatives for an extended period of time" (Kuh et al, 2005, p. 272). In other words, they stayed the course. College leaders are encouraged to build a strong team with both the curiosity to discover what can be improved and the persistence to experiment, assess the results, and try again until maximum student success and persistence are achieved.

Recommendations for Academic and Student Affairs Professionals

Academic and student affairs personnel can contribute to student persistence by offering programs in and out of the classroom that engage students from their initial days on campus through graduation. Academic affairs and student affairs professionals would also be wise to blur the lines between their divisions as much and as often as possible. For example, living-learning communities in which faculty engage in settings traditionally seen as the purview of residence life can provide meaningful and memorable opportunities for students.

In this study, students spoke enthusiastically about their experiences with faculty. While this was expected on small college campuses, it was striking because of the numerous experiences these students already had of meaningful faculty and staff interactions – all in their *first* year. They spoke of faculty and staff knowing their names, knowing about their interests and their families. This positive feedback should provide

encouragement for those who work in the academic and student life areas of campuses to continue to find ways to really know their students.

Recommendations for Enrollment Officers

Finally, enrollment officers can contribute to student persistence by aligning student expectations with reality in the recruitment process. They are wise to take steps to ensure that the experience they market to prospective students is as accurate as possible from the *student* perspective, rather than from a public relations perspective. Turner College does an admirable job creating authenticity in its marketing by continuously engaging currently enrolled students in the process. Additionally, enrollment officers can enhance the student-institution fit by the identification and use of admission factors that value and assess the whole student rather than simply looking at an applicant's academic achievements. Lastly, enrollment officers can expand ways to foster interactions between prospective students and their families and faculty, administrators and current students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research on student persistence will contribute to understanding how colleges and universities can enhance retention and graduation rates. Recommendations for additional research include the role of technology and the family, use of non-academic factors in the admission of students, and understanding college choice in persistence.

Mr. Jacobs, a 25-year admission veteran from Nile University, spoke at length about the changes he has observed in the role of the family and in the use of technology

in student behaviors. He believes the ability to stay in continuous contact with parents

through technology (texting, calling, FaceTime, Skype, FaceBook, etc.) has played a role

in student persistence in college. One could study this topic by a longitudinal qualitative

study that measures student- parent interactions over time. In such a study, students and

parents might complete surveys at several points in their first year to provide data on the

methods and frequency of their interaction. Student focus groups and interviews with

parents also would provide meaningful data. Surveys and focus groups also could

ascertain whether students or parents are the most frequent initiators of the contacts. In

the second year, these data could be correlated with students who persist and who leave

(available through the college) in order to examine if there are retention differences

consistent with type and frequency of family contact. The methodology used by Spence

(2011) provides a possible framework for this recommended study. Data collection for

Spence's study included interviews with parents of college juniors and seniors. Spence

found that parents understand the need for their students to make their own decisions and

to gain independence. However, he noted that parents who communicate multiple times a

day with their students also expect to be part of the student's decision-making process,

particularly in post-college plans. A study that examines the student-parent interaction in

the first year of college, when the student is adjusting, would add to the research in both

retention and to studies on the impact of increased communications between parents and

students.

An unexpected result of my study was the emphasis on student-institution fit.

This issue was raised by faculty, administrators in academic and student affairs, and by

enrollment officers. My study defined inputs only on the basis of academic achievement in high school. A study to examine the role of inputs by expanding the focus of other student characteristics on student persistence would be valuable. What other significant student characteristics exist at the three ELCA colleges examined in this study? A quantitative study to identify and measure possible non-academic student characteristics would expand the understanding of how these colleges achieve stronger than expected first-to-second year retention rates. This could be accomplished by using an existing database, such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), to collect data about these three colleges, and/or by surveying the colleges for data collection. The type of data to be collected might include geographic distribution of students, parents' educational attainment, gender, race and ethnicity, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic status. An analysis of these data would identify other characteristics, not known in my study, that would impact the first-to-second year retention rates.

A third recommendation for further research is to explore the relationship between college choice and persistence in college. One method for examining this is a quantitative study in which students are asked to report whether the college they chose was their first, second, or third choice. Variables associated with this choice assessment could also be explored, such as why they did not attend their first choice college or factors most important to them in determining the choice assignment. It would be important to gather this information early in the enrollment process (during early orientation or at fall orientation) in order to avoid having the actual first-year experience change student's choice perspective. These responses could then be correlated with

enrollment the following fall to determine if choice is significant to persistence.

Final Conclusion

Similar to recruitment of students, retention of students is both complex and is a blend of art and science. There is no single "silver bullet" solution for achieving desired student persistence and graduation levels. It is tempting to compare the rates of one campus to those of another college in determining which college is more effective. It is also tempting to look at aspirant institutions and make the assumption that the programs, facilities, and student profiles that work for them will work for one's campus to improve student success and retention. This study has highlighted for me the importance of continuous institutional assessment in order to know and understand one's own campus while keeping an eye on best practices at other institutions for ideas for improvement. It is not so much the specific ways programs are created on each campus; rather, it is the characteristics that are important. Each campus may (and probably should) have its distinctive programs, built with characteristics that matter in student persistence. Also evident in this study was the need for senior leadership to value student success as a campus priority and to create a campus climate that embraces that goal.

This study is of value to several stakeholders, including students and their families, to ELCA college leaders, and to small, faith-based college leaders more broadly. It may also be of value to those at the state and federal levels who have set higher college persistence and graduation rates as a goal for some institutions.

Prospective students and their parents are encouraged to consider the persistence and graduation rates on college campuses and to understand how the colleges perform

against expectations. *U.S. News and World Report* (2010) makes this information available for many colleges by publishing expected and actual graduation rates. Prospective students should ask how likely they are to succeed on a given campus and what might be expected of them in order to succeed. It is also helpful for students and parents to take every opportunity to really know the people at the colleges they are considering – prior to making an enrollment decision. Relationships with student peers, faculty, coaches and others will be instrumental in their success; therefore, prospective students are wise to meet them during the college selection process to maximize the probability of a good fit.

The design of this study provides a useful platform for assessment of student persistence. College leaders who seek to understand the factors that determine expected first-to-second year retention rates and actual rates on their campuses may be in stronger positions to enhance institutional retention and graduation rates. One way to enhance student persistence is to discuss inputs, or student characteristics, with faculty and administrators with the goal of enrolling a class with maximum "best fit" characteristics. Thinking of the environment as the many programs, facilities and policies that work best with the students who enroll there will further enhance discussions and strategies for student persistence. Even leaders at colleges with strong but less than or equal to predicted rates would be well served to consider how their campus environment can be enhanced in ways that contribute to greater student success.

This type of study should be of interest to state and national leaders who value student access to college and attainment of degrees. Applying a measurement of student

persistence on a given campus in relation to the students who are admitted is good news

to those who want to ensure adequate access for all students. If the critical indicator for

success is only higher graduation rates, colleges can attempt to achieve that by changing

the inputs or limiting the profile of students they admit. Colleges that provide access to

greater numbers of students identified as "at risk" serve an important role in society and

should not be measured against highly selective institutions that report high graduation

rates simply by their selectivity. In Astin's (1993) model, the institution seeks to

outperform against itself rather than against other institutions. In other words, the

difference between the expected persistence rate and the actual rate reflects the hard work

of the institution in providing an environment that impacts its students' success.

Sincere appreciation goes to all who made this study possible. I thank the ELCA

church-wide office in Chicago for the collection, analysis and dissemination of the

comprehensive database for over 30 years and to Mark Wilhelm, director for colleges and

universities, for allowing my use the data for analysis. Gratitude also goes to the many

participants who made the data collection possible. Liaisons on each campus spent

significant time understanding the study and scheduling appropriate campus

representatives and students. It was obvious that faculty and administrative interviewees

on all three campuses gave thought to retention on their campuses prior to my visits to

campus and each participant spent between 45 and 70 minutes talking with me about

student retention issues.

This study has had a great impact on me as a senior-level administrator for a

small, liberal arts, ELCA college. The design and findings of the study have made me

think differently about ways to assess retention and graduation rate performance. It is

true that small independent colleges must have healthy enrollment, driven by the ability

to attract and retain students. To that end, institutions must do all they can to maximize

recruitment and retention results by doing a better job of attracting students who best fit a

particular campus. And then a mix of programs must be offered in an engaging and

welcoming campus environment that works best for all students.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF EVANGELICAL LUTHER CHURCH IN AMERICA (ELCA)

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, 2010-2011

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Colleges & Universities
2010-2011

Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois
Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota
Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas
California Lutheran College, Thousand Oaks, California
Capital University, Columbus, Ohio
Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin
Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota
Finlandia College, Hancock, Michigan
Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
Grand View College, Des Moines, Iowa
Gustavus Adolphus College, Saint Peter, Minnesota
Lenoir-Rhyne College, Hickory, North Carolina
Luther College, Decorah, Iowa
Midland Lutheran College, Fremont, Nebraska
Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania
Newberry College, Newberry, South Carolina
Pacific Lutheran College, Tacoma, Washington
Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia
St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota
Susquehanna College, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania
Texas Lutheran College, Seguin, Texas
Thiel College, Greenville, Pennsylvania
Wagner College, Staten Island, New York
Waldorf College, Forest City, Iowa
Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa
Wittenberg College, Springfield, Ohio

APPENDIX B

LETTER REQUESTING APPROVAL TO USE ELCA DATABASE

June 1, 2009

Mr. Mark Wilhelm
Director for Colleges and Universities/Associate Executive Director for Educational
Partnerships and Institutions
Vocation and Education
ELCA Churchwide Organization
8765 W. Higgins Road
Chicago, IL 60631

Dear Mark:

Greetings from Roanoke! I hope all is well at the churchwide office. In January at
the Chief Enrollment Officers meeting we spoke about the research I would like to do
using the ELCA college and university historical database. You indicated a willingness to
allow this so I wanted to follow up to obtain your written authorization.

As part of my doctoral studies at Loyola University Chicago, I would like to use
this data for my dissertation. I am studying student persistence in college and am trying
to identify Lutheran colleges that outperform retention expectations. Specifically, using a
prediction model developed by Alexander Astin at UCLA and input variables of
incoming classes (from the ELCA data) I would like to identify three to four colleges that
consistently outperform first to second year expected retention rates. Further analysis of
the data may identify variables common to those colleges. I then plan to visit those
institutions to talk with campus leaders in an effort to identify other environmental
variables that may be critical to their success in student persistence.
I will contact campus leaders on those campuses to obtain permission to visit.

I appreciate the rich and long-standing database the ELCA headquarters has built
and maintained over the years and I am eager to pursue this study. Please confirm your
authorization for this use of the database. I am happy to discuss this further if it would be
helpful. Best wishes for a restful and rejuvenating summer.

Sincerely,

Brenda Porter Poggendorf
Vice President for Enrollment and
Dean of Admissions & Financial Aid

APPENDIX C

LETTER GIVING APPROVAL TO USE 2010 ELCA

TRENDS ANALYSIS REPORT DATA

VocaftonandEducafton

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

July 29, 2009

Brenda Porter Poggendorf
Vice President for Enrollment and
  Dean of Admissions & Financial Aid
Roanoke College
221 College Lane
Salem, Virginia 24153-3794

Dear Brenda:

I am writing in response to your letter of June 1 about using ELCA college and university data collected by the churchwide organization for your dissertation at Loyola University Chicago. Your letter was misdirected and only arrived at my desk late last week. I regret the resulting delay. This snailmailletter follows and confirms an email communication sent earlier today.

Yes, you have pennission to use these data for your project. Your analysis and reporting of the data, however, must mask the identity of the colleges and universities involved unless permission to identify the schools is received from them. Any aggregate reporting of the data is permitted without explicit permission from the schools.

Roanoke's institutional research office should hold copies of the data files. If you need copies, contact Arne Quanbeck at ame.guanbeck@elca.org or 773-380-2855. I do not know how many years of back data we have preserved, but you may have access to our holdings.

All the st,

The Rev. br. Mark N. Wilhelm
Associate Executive Director, Educational Partnerships and Institutions
Director for Colleges and Universities

APPENDIX D

2010 ELCA COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TRENDS ANALYSIS REPORT

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APPENDIX E

LETTER OF INSTITUTIONAL INVITATION

[Date]

[Name]
[Street Address]
[City, State Zip]

Dear [Salutation]:

I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. I am also the vice president for enrollment/dean of admission and financial aid at Roanoke College. It is an honor to formally invite your institution to participate in a research project I am conducting for my dissertation.

This study explores predicted vs. actual first-to-second year retention rates of students. Your campus has strong persistence rates from first-to-second year and I would like to explore that with you. Enclosed is a summary of the research, including an overview of the process and any associated risk to participants.

Loyola University Chicago's institutional review board (IRB) requires a signed letter of cooperation by an appropriate official before approval of my study at your institution will be granted. Enclosed is a sample letter of cooperation for your review.

Additionally, I am seeking recommendations for candidates from your campus to be interviewed as part of this study. Specifically, I would like one participant from each of the following areas: academic affairs, enrollment management, and student affairs, plus one other administrator of your choice who is especially knowledgeable about student persistence. I am also seeking two faculty members who teach primarily first-year students and two students who entered as first-time full-time freshmen who are now in their second year at your institution.

I will contact you soon to discuss your institution's participation in my study. Thank you for your consideration of my proposal.

Sincerely,

Brenda Porter Poggendorf
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education Program Loyola University Chicago
bpoggen@luc.edu

Enclosures: Summary of research
Loyola University Chicago IRB Application
Sample letter of institutional cooperation

APPENDIX F

LETTER OF INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

[Date]

Ms. Brenda Porter Poggendorf
6034 Wimbledon Court
Roanoke, VA 24018

Project Title: Exploring Predicted vs. Actual First-to-Second Year Retention Rates: A Study of Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America Protocol #: *insert number* (Loyola University Chicago)
Researcher: Brenda Porter Poggendorf

Dear Brenda:

You have proposed a study for which you will serve as investigator. You have shared a copy of your application to Loyola University Chicago's institutional review board (IRB). The procedures of your research protocol are clearly understood, particularly related to recruitment, consent and data collection.

With your particular protocol in mind, I grant you approval to conduct your study at our institution.

Sincerely,

[Name of Institutional Representative] [Title of Institutional Representative]

APPENDIX G

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Exploring Predicted vs. Actual First-to-Second Year Student Retention Rates: A Study of Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America

Brenda Porter Poggendorf
Doctoral Candidate, Loyola University Chicago bpoggen@luc.edu
(540) 529-2974

Who Am I?
My name is Brenda Porter Poggendorf. I am a doctor of philosophy candidate in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. I am also vice president for enrollment and dean of admission & financial aid at Roanoke College in Virginia.

Introduction:
Campus representatives are being asked to take part in a research study for a dissertation under the supervision of Terry E. Williams, Ph.D., in the Program of Higher Education at Loyola University Chicago. Candidates are selected because they are thought leaders, faculty or second-year students on one of the Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America (ELCA) campuses and because their role impacts the experience of students on campus.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to explore institutional environmental factors that may impact the retention of students from their first-to-second year. Specifically, this study seeks to identify environmental factors present on three Evangelical Lutheran Colleges of America (ELCA) institutions with strong first-to-second year retention rates.

Who is being asked to participate in this study?
Among administrators, the most desired participants are those who have at least three years of experience on their campus and who know and understand their campus culture and recent history. One participant from each of the following areas are requested: academic affairs, enrollment management and student affairs. Two faculty participants are requested. Among faculty, the most desired participants are those who have at least three years of experience on their campus and who teach at least one course per semester that predominantly enrolls first-year
students. Two second-year student participants are requested. Students desired for the study will be those who entered as freshmen and who are in their second year at the institution. Gender and ethnic diversity are desired but not required.

How will this study be conducted?
Participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one, face-to-face interview.   This interview will be held at a time and location convenient to the participant and will take place during one 60 to 90 minute time period. Unless requested otherwise, the interview will be audio recorded. Interviewees will be asked to share their thoughts and perceptions about programs and experiences related to first-to-second year retention of students on their current campus. They will be asked to provide their perceptions about the

programs, policies, and activities on their campus that they consider to be strategic in impacting first-to-second year persistence. Participants may be contacted after the interview to clarify and verify statements made during the interview. The identity of each interviewee and the identity of the institution will not be revealed.

What are the possible risks to participants?
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

What are the benefits to participants?
Possible benefits to participants include their awareness that they will contribute to a greater understanding of effective institutional factors that positively impact first-to-second year student persistence, particularly at ELCA colleges and universities. Upon request, the findings of this study will be provided to all participants.

Confidentiality:
The names of all participants, institutions, and programs will not be released or known to anyone other than the researcher, Brenda Porter Poggendorf. All consent forms, transcribed interviews, interview notes, and audio recordings that might identify an interview participant will be kept safely secured in locked files and then destroyed two years after the study is completed. Consent forms will include a pseudonym by which each person interviewed will be referred in the transcribed interviews, interview notes, and audio recordings by which interview data are collected. These consent forms will be stored separately from the transcribed interviews, interview notes, and audio recordings. The individual transcribing interview data from audio recordings will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to receiving the audio recordings.

APPENDIX H

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

[Date]

[Name]
[Street Address]
[City, State, Zip]

Dear [Salutation]:

Brenda Poggendorf, a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago and vice president for enrollment/dean of admission and financial aid at Roanoke College in Virginia, is conducting a study on student persistence. Because you meet the criteria of an interview participant, I suggested that you might agree to participate in an interview as part of this study.

This study generally explores predicted vs. actual first-to-second year retention rates of students. Specifically, it looks at institutional environmental factors found on ELCA campuses that have strong first-to-second year retention rates. Enclosed is a summary of the research, including an overview of the process and any associated risk to participants.

Please consider participating in this important study. Your participation will in no way affect your status with the college. The interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be scheduled on a day and time that are convenient for you. Thank you for your consideration of this proposal. Please let me know if you have any questions and whether you agree to participate.

Sincerely,

[name of liaison] [title of liaison]

Enclosures

APPENDIX I

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent to Participate

Project Title: Exploring Predicted vs. Actual First-to-Second Year Student Retention
Rates: A Study of Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America

Researcher: Brenda Porter Poggendorf, Ph.D. Candidate, Loyola University Chicago

Faculty Sponsor: Terry E. Williams, Ph.D.

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Brenda Porter
Poggendorf for a dissertation under the supervision of Terry E. Williams, Ph.D., in the
Program of Higher Education at Loyola University Chicago. You are being asked to
participate because you are integral to the first year experience on your campus or you are
a second-year student on one of the Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America (ELCA)
campuses.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding
whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to explore institutional environmental factors that may
impact the persistence of students from their first-to-second year. Specifically, this study
seeks to identify environmental factors present in three Evangelical Lutheran Colleges of
America (ELCA) institutions whose actual first-to-second year retention rates are strong.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview.
This interview will in no way affect your status with the institution. It will be held at a
time and location convenient to you and it will take place during one 60 to 90 minute
time period. Unless you request otherwise, the interview will be audio recorded. You
will be asked to share your thoughts and perceptions about programs and experiences
related to first-to-second year persistence of students on your current campus. You will
be asked to provide your perceptions about the programs, policies, and activities on your
campus that you consider to be strategic in impacting first-to-second year persistence.

You may be contacted after the interview to clarify and verify statements that you made
during the interview. Your identity and the identity of the institution will not be revealed.

Risks/Benefits:
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those
experienced in everyday life. Possible benefits to participants include their awareness that
they will contribute to a greater understanding of student persistence at ELCA colleges
and universities. Upon request, the findings of this study will be provided to all
participants.

Confidentiality:
The names of all participants, institutions, and programs will not be released or known to anyone other than the researcher, Brenda Poggendorf. All consent forms, transcribed interviews, interview notes, and audio recordings that might identify an interview participant will be kept safely secured in locked files and then destroyed two years after the study is completed. Consent forms will include a pseudonym by which each person interviewed will be referred in the transcribed interviews, interview notes, and audio recordings by which interview data are collected. These consent forms will be stored separately from the transcribed interviews, interview notes, and audio recordings. The individual transcribing interview data from audio recordings will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to receiving the audio recordings.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary and will in no way affect your status with your institution. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Brenda Poggendorf at (540) 529-2974 or bpoggen@luc.edu. You may also contact Ms. Poggendorf's faculty sponsor, Dr. Terry E. Williams at (312) 915-7002 or twillia@luc.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Audio Recording Refusal:
As a participant in this study, you may refuse to allow your interview to be audio recorded. If this is your preference, it will be acknowledged by both your and the researcher's initials below.

Participant's Initials: _____
Researcher's Initials: _____

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____
Researcher's Signature   Date

APPENDIX J

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Faculty and Administration Interview Protocol

1. Introduction

   a. Thank you for participating in this Study

   b. Have participant sign the consent form.

   c. Confirm that they have 60-90 minutes available

   d. Confirm confidentiality of their comments

2. Can you share with me why it is that your institution is successful in getting large numbers of students to return to campus for their second year?

3. Can you describe for me any particular programs, activities, practices or policies that you feel may contribute to student persistence on your campus?

   a. It would be helpful to know what it is about these programs, practices or policies that make them impactful. Can you share your thoughts with me?

4. Would you share with me whether your campus has any stated goals regarding student retention and persistence?

5. Can you share with me who the major drivers in student retention efforts are on your campus?

6. In your opinion, do the facilities on your campus in some way contribute to student persistence?

   a. If so, can you share with me what it is about those facilities that impact student persistence?

7. In your opinion, what else on your campus contributes to student persistence?

8. Would you share with me, of those programs, facilities and activities you have

identified as important to retention on your campus, how would you rate them in terms of their effectiveness and why?

9. Is there anything else you feel is important to the persistence of students on your campus that you would like to share?

10. In your opinion, why it is that some first-year students who were here last year but did not return this year?

11. Can you describe for me any particular programs, activities, practices or policies that you feel may contribute to why some students who were here last year but did not return this year?

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about why students stay or leave your college?

APPENDIX K

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Interview Protocol

1. Introduction

   a. Thank you for participating in this study

   b. Have participant sign the consent form.

   c. Confirm that they have 60-90 minutes available

   d. Confirm confidentiality of their comments

2. Can you share with me the main reasons you chose to attend this college?

   a. It would be helpful to know of the reasons you provided, which was the most important to you, second, third…

3. Would you share with me what your first year experience was like?

   a. Of the description you provided, can you share with me what parts of that experience had the greatest impact and why that was?

4. What are the main reasons you chose to return to your college for your second year?

5. Let's talk a bit about the physical campus environment. Are there facilities here that impact your desire to be a student here?

   a. Of the facilities you mentioned, it would be helpful to know which have the greatest impact on you and why that might be. Would you share that with me?

6. What else on your campus leads you to be enrolled?

7. Would you expand and share with me - those programs, facilities and other factors you have identified as important to you, how would you rate them in terms of the desirability, and why?

8. Is there anything else you feel is important to the persistence of students on your

campus that you would like to share?

9. Let's talk about students who leave this college. Think of students who enrolled with you last year and who did not return this year. From what you know, why did they not return this year?

10. In your opinion, are there specific programs, policies, facilities, or activities that impacted their decision not to return?

11. As you think about students at your college, is there anything else you would like to share about why students stay or leave your college?

APPENDIX L

DATA TRANSCRIPTION CONFIDENTIALITY FORM

Data Transcription Confidentiality Form

I agree to transcribe the interviews for the doctoral research of Brenda Poggendorf entitled "Exploring Predicted vs. Actual First-to-Second Year Retention Rates: A Study of Evangelical Lutheran Colleges in America." I will maintain strict confidentiality of the audio data files and the transcripts. This includes, but is not limited to the following:

- I will not discuss them with anyone but the researcher.
- I will not share copies with anyone except the researcher.
- I agree to turn over all copies of the transcripts to the researcher at the conclusion of the contract.
- I agree to destroy all audio files at the conclusion of the contract.

I have read the information above and agree to the terms as outlined.

_____

Transcriber's Signature   Date

_____

Researcher's Signature   Date

APPENDIX M

ELCA COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES CLASS RANK VS.

FIRST-TO-SECOND YEAR RETENTION RATE 1999-2008
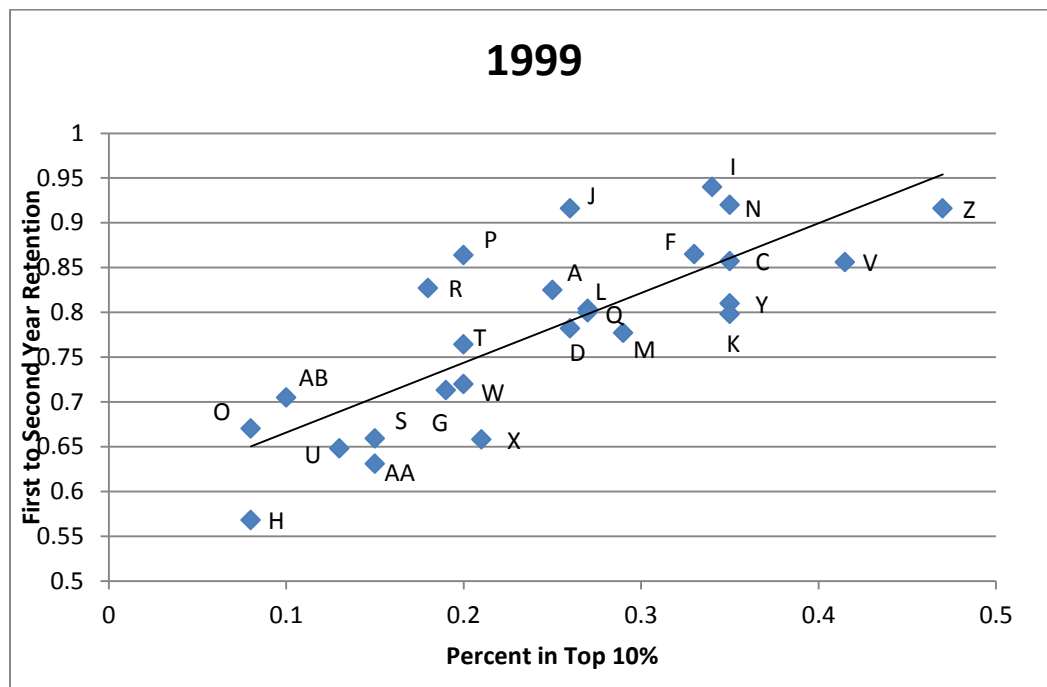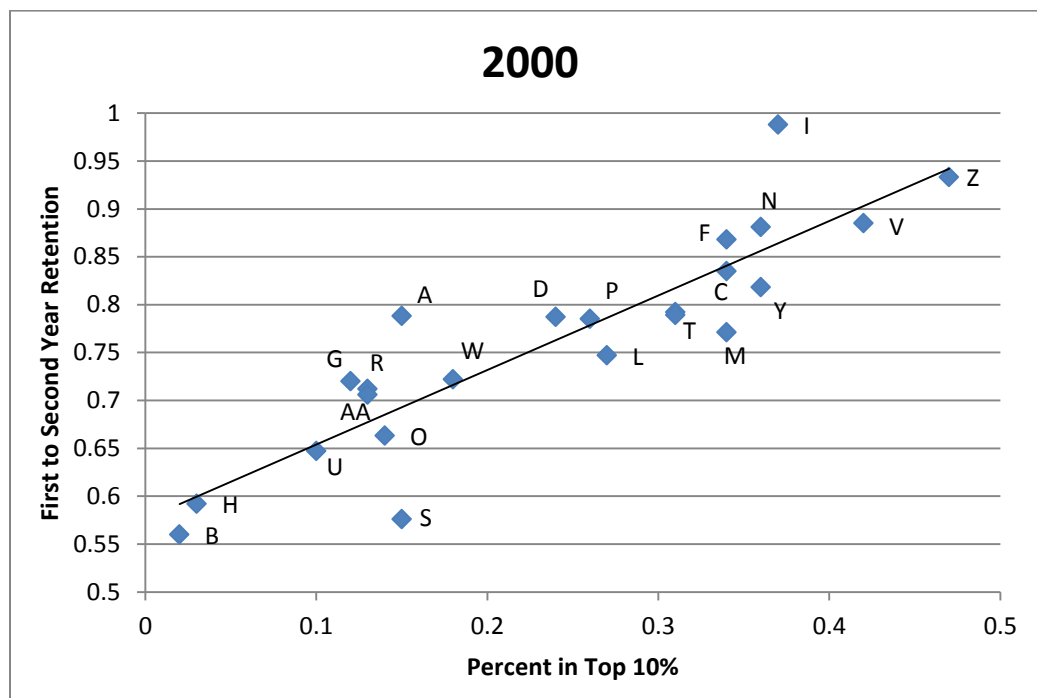
Figure M1: Source: *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*
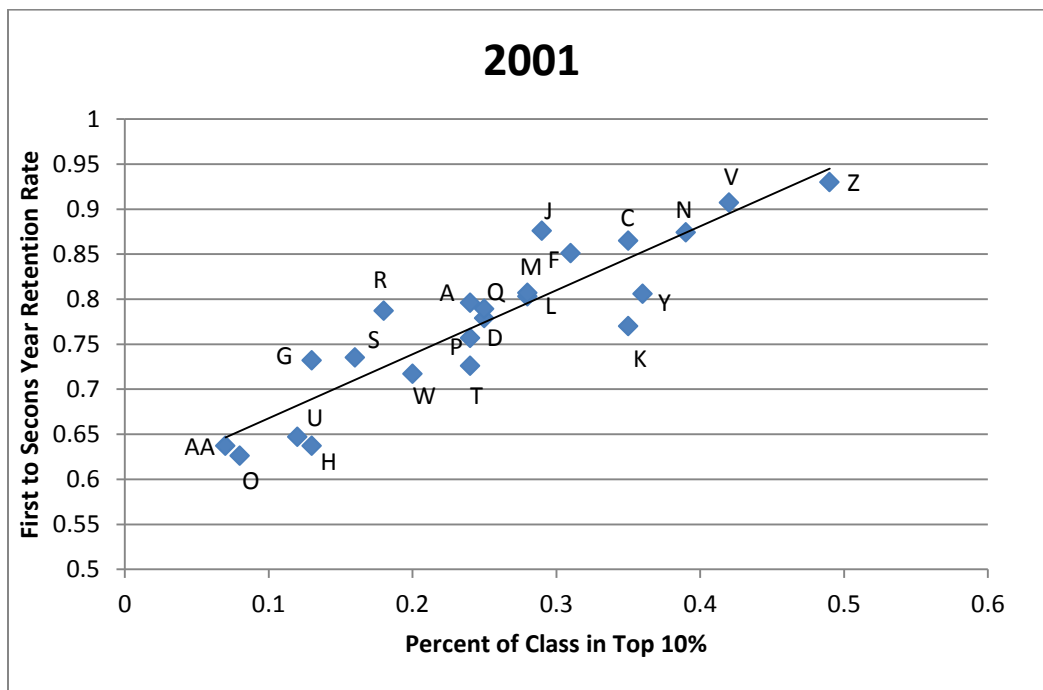

Figure M2: Source: *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*
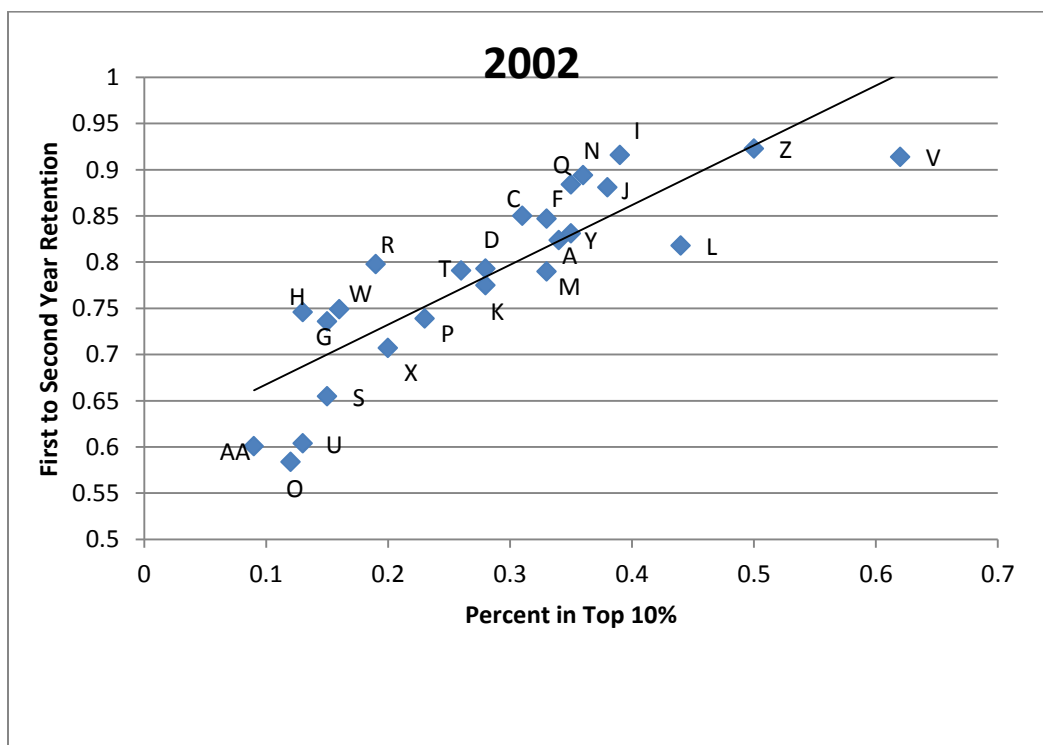
Figure M3: Source: *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*
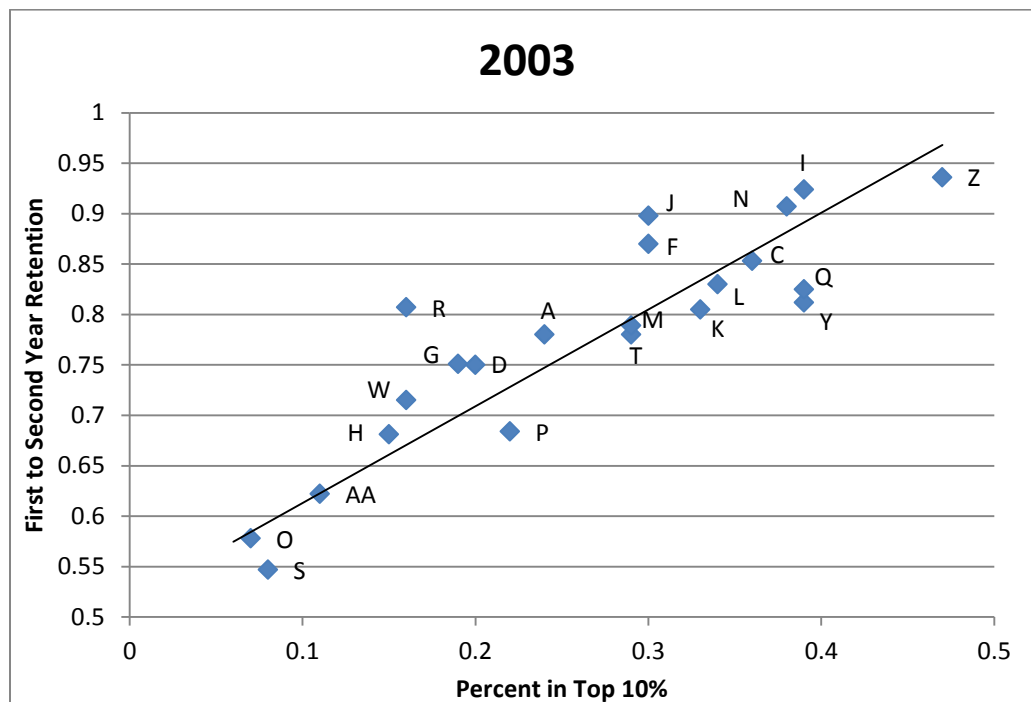

Figure M4: Source: *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*

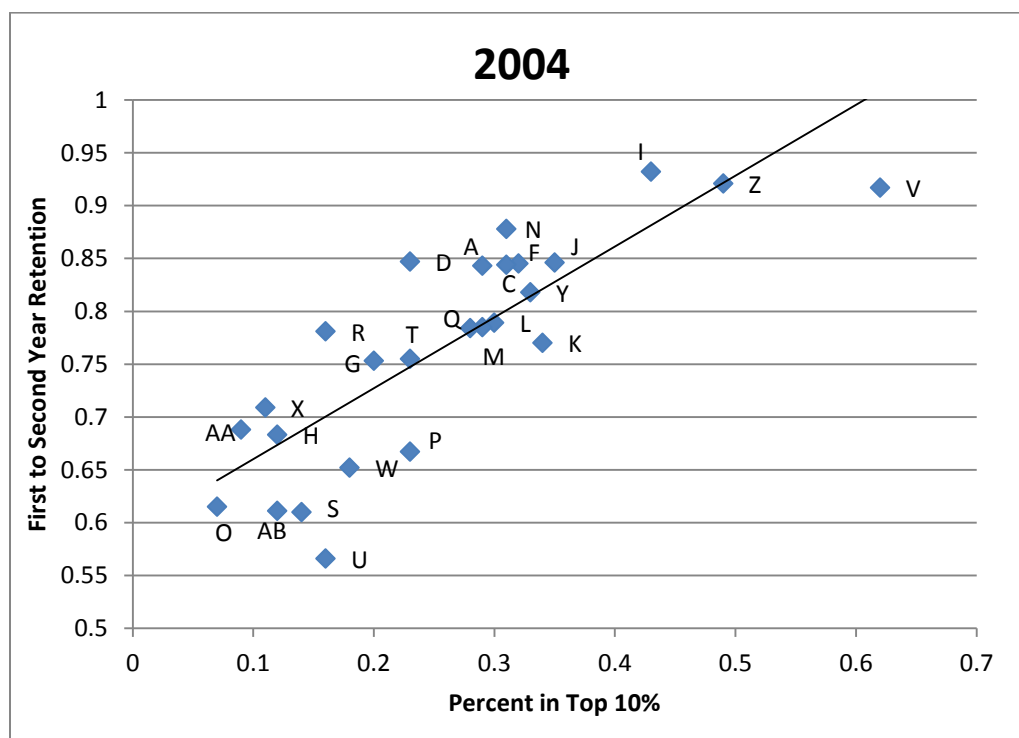**Figure M5: Source:** *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*

Figure M6: Source: *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*
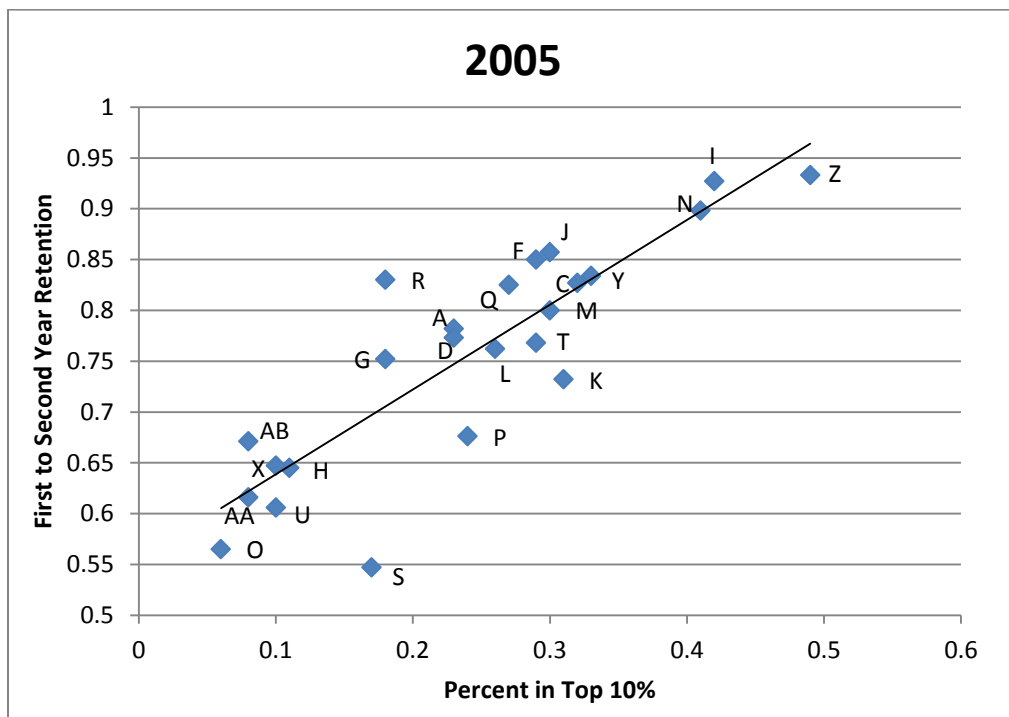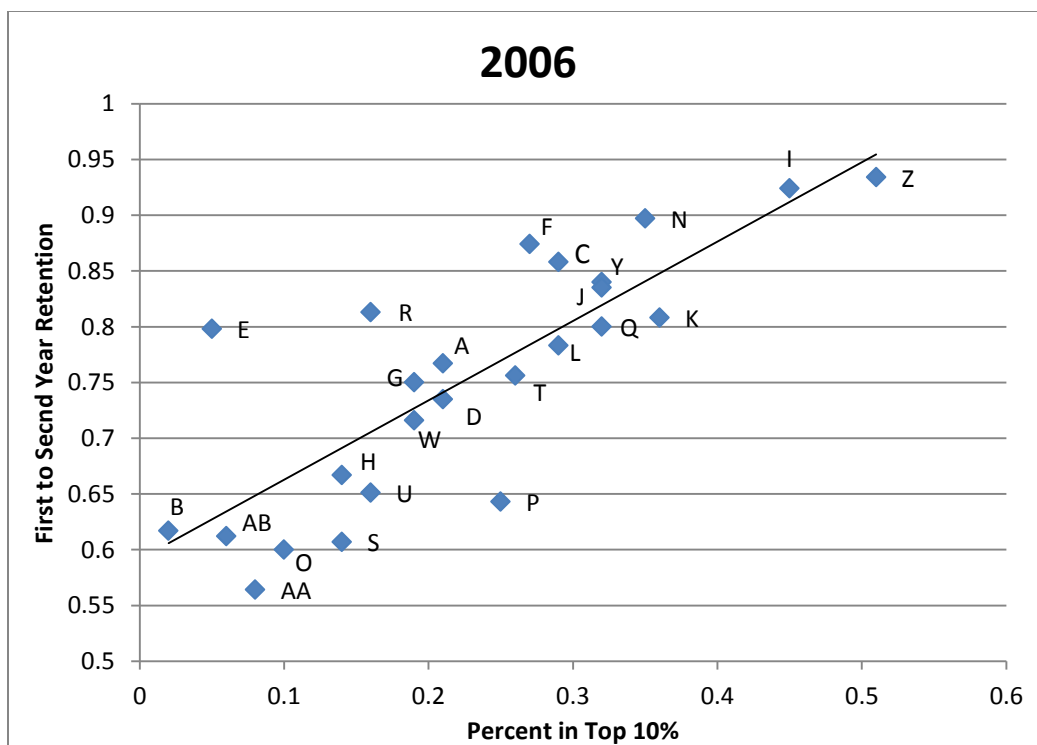
Figure M7: *Source: 2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*

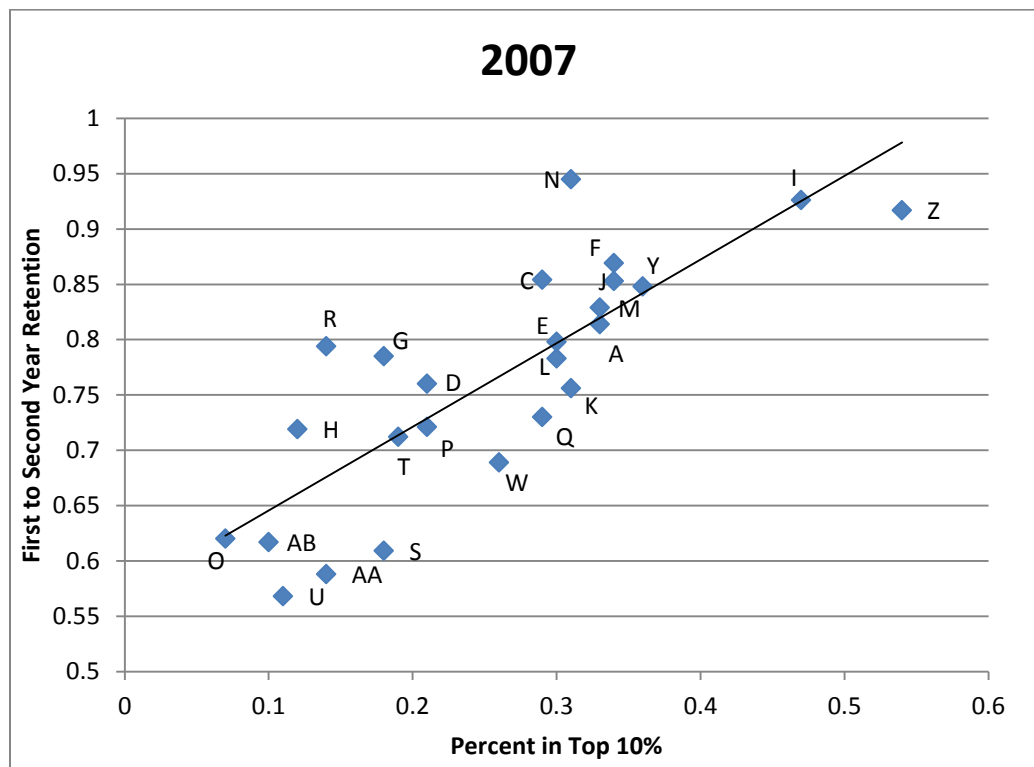**Figure M8: Source: 2***010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*

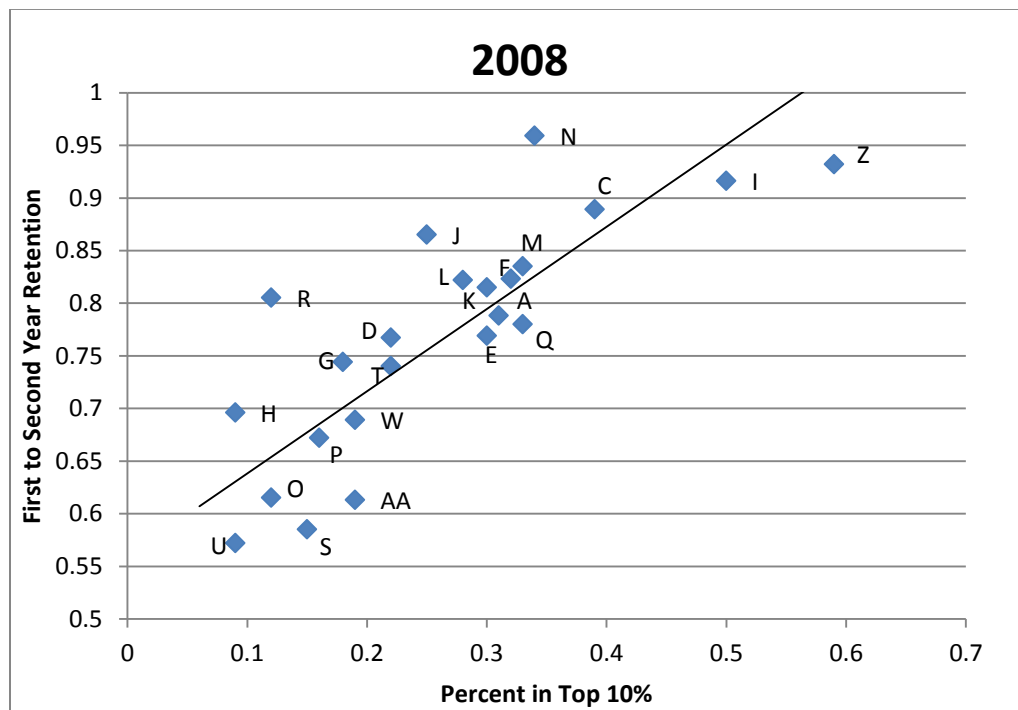**Figure M9: Source:** *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*

Figure M10: Source: *2010 ELCA Trends Analysis Report*

APPENDIX N

ELCA COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: SUMMARY OF FIRST-TO-SECOND

YEAR RETENTION RATES, ACTUAL VS. PREDICTED

College	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
A	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		
AA		X				X				
AB	X						X			
B										
C			X	X		X		X	X	X
D		X			X	X	X		X	X
E								X		
F	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
G		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
H				X	X	X			X	X
I	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		
J	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
K										X
L										X
M										X
N	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X
O	X									
P	X	X								
Q			X	X			X			
R	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
S			X							
T	X			X						X
U										
V										
W		X		X	X					
X						X				
Y								X		
Z										

Source: 2010 ELCA Colleges & Universities Trends Analysis Report

APPENDIX O

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS RUBRIC

Attribute	Above Expectations	Meets Expectations	Below Expectations
Beauty of campus Buildings Landscaping Physical environment			
Friendliness of People			
Level of Engagement Opportunities Student-Student Interaction Faculty-Student Interaction Community Spaces Group Study Spaces			
Campus Setting (access to town or isolated)			
Student Amenities Variety of food venues Workout facilities/classes Transportation			

APPENDIX P

OBSERVATION ANALYSIS RUBRIC

Attribute	Above Expectations	Meets Expectations	Below Expectations

Beauty of campus
  Buildings
  Landscaping
  Physical environment			

Friendliness/ Helpfulness of People			

Level of Engagement Opportunities
  Posters
  Community Spaces
  Group Study Spaces			

Campus Setting (access to town or isolated)			

Student Amenities
  Variety of food venues
  Workout facilities/classes
  Transportation			

APPENDIX Q

PARTICIPANTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Name	Institution	Role
Professor Anderson	Turner College	Assistant Professor
Ms. Bailey	Turner College	Director of Residential Services
Dean Brown	Jay College	Dean of the College
Professor Campbell	Jay College	Professor
Professor Connor	Jay College	Associate Professor
Mr. Cooper	Jay College	Assoc. Director of Admissions & Financial Aid
Professor Evans	Nile University	Associate Professor
Dr. Finch	Nile University	Director of Institutional Research & Asst. Provost
Professor Green	Turner College	Professor
Mr. Jacobs	Nile University	Director of Admission
Dr. Jones	Jay College	Dean of Students
Dean Mann	Nile University	Dean of the Faculty
Mr. Miller	Jay College	Director of Financial Aid
Mr. McDonald	Nile University	Director of Residence Life & Civic Engagement
Dean Murphy	Turner College	Dean of the College
Professor Nielsen	Nile University	Assoc. Professor
Ms. Smith	Nile University	Vice President for Enrollment
Ms. Spencer	Turner College	Assistant Dean of the College for Academic Life
Mr. Swanson	Turner College	Dean of Admission & Financial Aid
Ms. Thomas	Nile University	Associate Dean of Students
Dr. Wilson	Jay College	Vice President for Enrollment

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VITA

Brenda Poggendorf earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Roanoke College (VA), and received a Master of Liberal Studies from Hollins College (now University) (VA), and a Master of Business Administration from Loyola University Chicago (IL). Brenda has worked in higher education since 1982, and has served in a variety of roles, primarily in enrollment management and as assistant to the president. Throughout her career, she has worked at Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) colleges, at Carthage College from 1988-2007 and at Roanoke College from 1982-1988 and from 2007-present. She has served on multiple committees within each of these institutions and on committees within the greater higher education community. Currently, Brenda is Vice President for Enrollment/Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Roanoke College where she oversees recruitment, admission, financial aid, and marketing efforts for all new students as well as coordinating college-wide retention efforts. Brenda has presented various enrollment management topics at conferences and has served as consultant to numerous colleges.