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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.

Dr. Nannette Glenn, Dean of
the College of Graduate and
Professional Studies

Date November 15th, 2021

Dissertation Committee:

Lisa Hobson

Dr. Lisa Hobson, Chair

Mark McCallon

Dr. Mark McCallon

Jason Morris

Dr. Jason Morris

Abilene Christian University
School of Educational Leadership

The Impact of Leadership and Institutional Priorities on
Degree Completion of Community College Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Estelle L. Garza

December 2021

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Abstract

This study explored student perceptions of leadership and the impact they believed it to have on their ability to complete a degree at a community college district. Community college degree completion is both a statewide and national problem as most students who start a degree program will drop out before reaching the requirements to finish their degree, which can hurt their career opportunities and the economy. The purpose of this study was to determine how students perceive factors like leadership and their satisfaction with institutional priority factors to impact degree completion. This study used action research and a mixed methods research methodology to understand student perceptions through qualitative interviews, survey questionnaire items, and a satisfaction inventory. The sample of this study included currently enrolled students at a community college district who had completed at least 45 credit hours and were working on their first degree. Students completed a student satisfaction inventory, a survey questionnaire, and some students participated in a one-on-one interview. Results from the study suggested that students found these areas to be most effective: academic services, student support services, and student centeredness. Students found academic advising, safety and security, and concern for the individual to be the least effective. Some students perceived leadership to have an impact on their ability to complete their degree, while others did not. In conclusion, student perceptions of leadership vary based on the individual experience.

Keywords: degree completion, student satisfaction, leadership, institutional priority factors, community college, student perceptions

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Community colleges play a significant role in access to higher education as they provide a lower-cost option for students interested in two-year technical or transferable degree programs and ultimately lead to well-paying occupations. According to Kilgore and Wilson (2017), "Community and technical colleges hold the primary role in awarding certificates and associate degrees in the United States. They are predominantly open-access institutions that disproportionately serve low-income students, adult learners, students of color, and first-generation students" (pp. 7–8). Community colleges provide open access, meaning many do not require a certain GPA, class rank, college admissions tests, or in some cases, even a high school diploma to attend. These common characteristics allow community colleges to provide education for students who might experience financial, geographical, or socioeconomic barriers (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Community colleges are in a unique position to accept first-generation students, underrepresented students, or students with limited financial means because of their relatively low cost of attendance and open-access admissions policies (Davis et al., 2015), making them more accessible to students compared to four-year institutions (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2016; Turk, 2018).

Despite easy access, 45% of community college students in the United States will not complete a degree or certificate within three years, suggesting there is a need for more effective institutional action (Yu, 2015). Community colleges play a unique role in achieving the national agenda of degree completion as they serve such a large population of students (Handel, 2013). Community colleges educate approximately half of all undergraduate students in the United States (Davis et al., 2015). Additionally, Texas, the state of this study, enrolls nearly 9% of all community college students nationally (Park, 2015). Because of the importance of community

colleges' role, Sanacore and Palumbo (2016) recommended that college leaders engage in strategic practices that can lead to higher graduation rates, such as supporting them emotionally, socially, and academically (i.e., institutional factors). Campus resources are a vital part of the support community college students' need, especially those who may be the first in their family or only one of their friends to attend college (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2016).

Therefore, low degree completion rates are a problem for a high percentage of students across the country who attend community colleges to attain better-paying jobs and employers who rely on access to a trained and educated workforce (Levesque, 2018). In this study, I address the issue of low degree completion, including examples at the national, state, and institutional level. All levels contextualize the problem examined in this study. I examined the problem at three levels, and the background of the study provides the information to (a) understand the problem of low degree completion, for example, community colleges having low percentages of student degree completion and (b) explore the problem of degree completion in the context of institutional priorities, leadership, and student satisfaction. I included background information and research about the problem at each level. Additionally, I examined how perceived student satisfaction relates to a community college student's ability to complete an associate degree program.

Background of the Study

National Context of Student Degree Completion

On a national level, low rates of degree completion are an organizational issue prevalent in community colleges, which comprise over half of all higher education institutions in the United States (Bailey et al., 2015; Eddy, 2013). Tinto (2012a) has documented the national problem low degree completion rates have posed for higher education leaders for the past several

years. The ability for any individual to have access to a college education is one of the commitments our society makes to the value of education, which is why it is particularly troubling when a little more than half of the students who start a degree program do not complete it (Bailey et al., 2015). Not only does low degree completion hurt the economy, but it also affects the individual student, who subsequently views the college enrollment experiences as frustrating and disappointing, along with perceptions that they wasted their time and money (Bailey et al., 2015). One reason why low rates of college degree completion are problematic is that, without higher education, students potentially miss opportunities for social and economic mobility (Yu, 2015).

With consistently low degree completion rates at colleges across the U.S., researchers have questioned the methods used to encourage degree completion amongst college graduates (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011; Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 2012a). College administrators bear the responsibility to shape policy and practice that will immediately impact students and, presumably, their ability to be successful in college (Campbell et al., 2010).

Community college students can face various challenges during their time to complete their degrees. Institutional factors, specifically student engagement (involvement on campus), engagement with faculty, support services staff (e.g., advisement and financial aid), and utilizing on-campus resources (e.g., tutoring), can reduce the risk of these dynamics, leading to increased degree completion (Park, 2015; Tinto, 2012a). Institutional factors may include access to academic advising, financial aid resources, and campus safety (Noel Levitz, 2015). Institutional factors, resources, and practices can influence a student's ability to complete a degree, and according to Jacob (2018), community colleges should invest the time and money required to implement these practices correctly.

Students who complete postsecondary education and training increase their ability to find good jobs and grow their lifetime earnings potential (Carnevale et al., 2017). Furthermore, by 2020, 65% of all jobs in the U.S. will require education or training at a level beyond a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2013). One report suggests that only 20% of enrolled students, including students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, will complete an associate degree within three years (Jacob, 2018). Therefore, many of the students who would benefit most significantly from the skills and training that can lead to better-paying jobs are missing this opportunity, and community colleges are falling short on their ability to produce college completers who can compete in today's labor market (Levesque, 2018).

Nationally, many variables contribute to low degree completion rates; however, many institutional factors can contribute to the increase in degree completion rates. Shifts in institutional priorities, practices, and resources can give way to the future of higher completion rates for students across the country. Instead of blaming students for departure, an action prevalent 40 years ago (Tinto, 1975), the framework now allows college administrators to take a proactive role by identifying what they can do to help students succeed. These actions include implementing institutional practices such as new student orientation, degree planning, and individualized class placement (B. McClenney, 2013; Tinto, 2012a).

Degree Completion Issues at the State Level

Texas, the state of the site of this study, ranks 31st in the U.S. for the completion of associate degrees (The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2021). According to the state's governing body over higher education institutions, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), if this trend of lower-than-average degree completion continues, this southwestern state could fall behind in global competitiveness and communities

could lose their ability to prosper (THECB, 2015). In Texas, statewide initiatives require all public institutions to develop and implement college degree completion plans (Kilgore & Wilson, 2017) as part of a larger initiative to increase degree completion. Texas higher education stakeholders identified the need for skilled and educated workers, which will increase over the next several years, and students will need to complete degrees and certificates to meet these demands adequately (THECB, 2015). As the Texas higher education system shifts its priorities towards the increasing degree and certificate attainment in community colleges, institutions of higher education face the responsibility of graduating skilled and competent workers (Carnevale et al., 2013; THECB, 2015). There is a need for community college districts across the state and nation to implement institutional initiatives. The problem of low degree completion rates continues to impact local economies, and plans to make changes in organizational culture and assurance of faculty engagement could ensure student success (Kilgore & Wilson, 2017). Completing an associate degree prepares graduates to enter the workforce, ultimately leading to a more robust economy and more productive communities (THECB, 2015).

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2015a) provides a self-study and planning manual for institutions to use. The AACU challenges higher education institutions and leaders to

make a pervasive commitment to equity and inclusive excellence—both preparing students for and providing them with access to high-quality learning opportunities and ensuring that students of color and low-income students participate in the most empowering forms of college learning. (AACU, p. 4)

At the statewide level, Texas policymakers focus on increasing degree completion rates amongst students to help meet the growing demand for a skilled and educated workforce

(THECB, 2015). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the governing body for higher education institutions in Texas, created an agenda aimed at nearly doubling the number of degrees awarded in the state, referred to as the 60x30TX Higher Education Strategic Plan. 60x30TX hopes to help colleges reach the goal of 60% of students ages 25-34 in obtaining a degree or certificate by the year 2030 (THECB, 2018).

The goals of the 60x30TX initiative are to prioritize creating an educated population with a completed degree or credential, marketable skills, and manageable student debt (THEBC, 2015). The goals of this initiative called on leaders in education to implement policies, procedures, and suggested strategies so that Texas does not continue to have college degree completion rates lower than the national average. These strategies include focusing on a student-centered model, implementing college readiness assessments, and collaborating with K-12 leaders (THECB, 2015). The state aims to become a leader in degree completion so that both the local economy and students benefit from having an educated workforce (THECB, 2015).

Institutional Level Degree Completion

Increasing rates of degree completion is a priority of a community college district in North Texas. According to the mission, core values, and philosophy of the institution that serves as the research site for this study, the college provides resources necessary to help students achieve their individual educational goals, including transferring to a four-year institution, completing a technical program, developing marketable skills and meeting the local community's workforce needs.

At a community college in North Texas, which served as the data collection site for this study, students depart at a rate higher than the national average. In the 2017-2018 school year,

only 16% of students from the college graduated after 150% time to degree, while the United States average is 22% (National Center for Higher Education, 2017a).

College Systems and Practices That Support Student Degree Completion and Satisfaction

Organizational culture catalyzes success regarding retention and degree completion (Gonzalez, 2015; Tinto, 2012a). To achieve student success through higher degree completion rates, community college administrators should establish a student-centered approach as an institutional priority (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Leadership and institutional priorities set the foundation for student success through the college or university's mission and core values (Tschechtelin, 2011). Leaders should set clear expectations and shared goals across the college (McNair et al., 2015), which the institution can accomplish through the mission, core values, and philosophy. Bailey et al. (2015) pointed to the importance of transparency and open leadership meetings, which can contribute to the dynamic organizational culture and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the overall institution. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) encourages college leaders to approach their institution with a sense of direction based on history, backed up by data and aimed at capturing student populations. The practice of basing decisions on history and data is beneficial for underserved students, and intervening with high-impact practices, such as orientation, revised curriculum, and providing knowledgeable faculty and staff advisors (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015b), can lead to better effectiveness.

One factor students contribute to their success, and degree completion is satisfaction, as measured through a set of institutional priorities. Student satisfaction refers to a student's perception that higher education institutions are meeting or exceeding their expectations; typically, the closer the reality is to the expectation, the more satisfaction a student will have

(Noel Levitz, 2015). As an example, Davis et al. (2015) acknowledged that institutional practices such as recognizing marginalized groups and structuring early interventions had a higher positive impact on community college students when actions, such as early warning systems for students at risk of failing, effective advising, and new student orientations unified across departments headed by effective leadership. Practices were less effective when there were disconnections between the divisions, and administrators, faculty, staff, and students had different priorities or did not implement the interventions in the same way (Davis et al., 2015).

A study of student satisfaction at institutions across the U.S. suggests that student satisfaction can influence their persistence or retention from semester to semester towards degree completion (Schreiner, 2009). Further research suggests that low student satisfaction can lead to higher attrition rates (students dropping out of college; Bryant, 2006). In this study, I considered students' perceptions of satisfaction related to their ability to complete a degree program.

Statement of the Problem

At the national level, the problem of low degree completion affects both the students who start a degree program (and do not finish, hindering their ability to compete for good jobs), as well as the workforce, which will favor jobs requiring at least an associate degree (Carnevale et al., 2017).

The problem of low rates of college degree completion affects students on a statewide level as well. Attainment of an associate degree in Texas falls under the national average, making it a cause for concern (THECB, 2018). Low degree completion rates are a problem that needs attention, and as Texas moves towards completing the 60x30TX agenda, the focus will address how college leaders respond to achieve the shared goal. Community college leaders are in a position to shift practices and follow some of the THECB's suggested strategies to combat

low degree completion rates. Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board needs action from leaders in education to commit to the 60x30TX agenda (THECB, 2015).

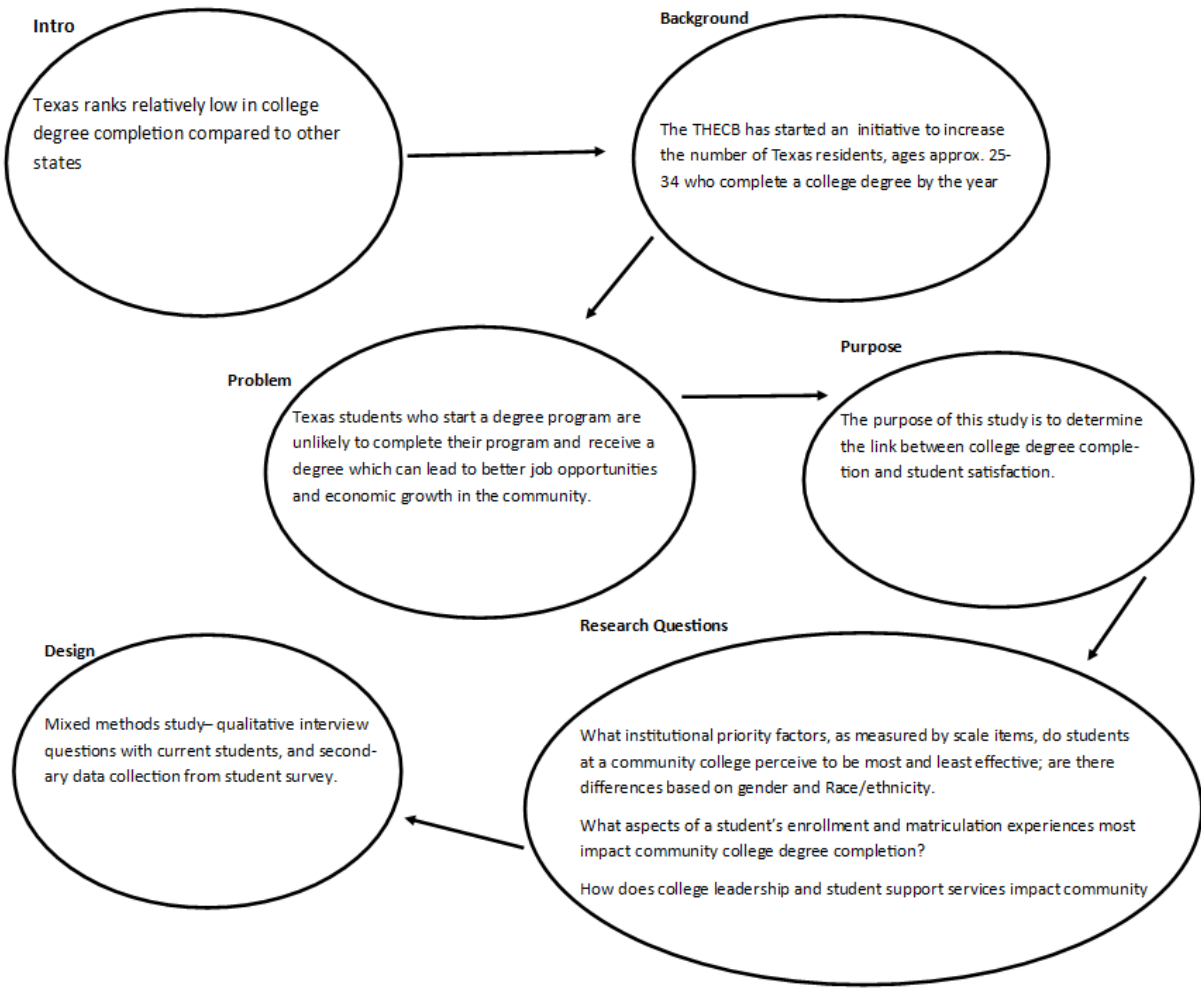
The problem encountered at this study site is a lower-than-average rate of degree completion (National Center for Higher Education, 2017). Only 13.4% of students graduated from the community college district in North Texas by 2018 from the 2014 cohort. The community college district has implemented many new initiatives over the past few years to increase rates of degree completion amongst students. Some of these initiatives include academic coaches, online interactive degree planning, intrusive advising, enhanced offerings of developmental co-requisite classes, and the development of programs for special populations, such as women in STEM. Therefore, this study hopes to understand how the institutional priority factors, measured by student satisfaction of the college, can help students increase their ability to complete a degree from this district. I wanted to understand the perceptions of students and how their measures of satisfaction with institutional priorities on campus could relate to the lower-than-average degree completion rates at a community college district in North Texas.

Statement of the Purpose and Operational Definitions

Given the lower-than-average completion rates and statewide call to action, the study of degree completion is timely for students at community colleges in Texas. Therefore, the purpose of this mixed methods research study was to examine the perceptions of community college students in regard to the satisfaction of institutional priority factors and leadership on their ability to complete a degree. I primarily focused on full-time students at a community college district in Texas. A conceptual logic map helps to aid in understanding how the topics support the implementation and design of the study for the sample site, a Texas community college with degree completion challenges (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Logic Map to Depict the Flow of the Problem of Practice to the Research Design



For the qualitative portion of the study, I asked questions to understand students' perceptions of their ability to complete their degree program while focusing on student satisfaction. I then triangulated the data by exploring artifacts and institutional documents regarding degree completion initiatives and examining student satisfaction using the previously collected data from the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) for student perceptions of the college's institutional priority factors. In this study, I referred to the assessments as the RNL

Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series. According to Noel Levitz scale items, the institutional priority factors include student-centeredness, campus safety, and individualized advising (Noel Levitz, 2015).

Research Questions

The guiding research questions, inclusive of quantitative (RQs 1–3) and qualitative (RQs 4–5), undergirding this study are as follows:

RQ1: What institutional priority factors, as measured by scale items, do students at a community college district in North Texas perceive to be most effective?

RQ2: What institutional priority factors, as measured by scale items, do students at a community college district in North Texas perceive to be least effective?

RQ3: Are there differences in satisfaction of overall experience and the perceived priority of the institution for a student to complete a degree based on gender and race/ethnicity at a community college district in North Texas?

RQ4: What aspects of a student's enrollment and matriculation experiences most impact community college degree completion?

RQ5: How do college leadership and student support services impact community college students' degree completion?

Rationale for the Study

The impetus for this study develops from Tinto's theory of student departure (2012a), complexity leadership theory, and critical race theory. Through an intersection of these existing theories, I addressed how these theories can help institutions understand the students' perspectives in the conceptual framework section of this study. I examined students' perceptions of their ability to be successful by examining how they view the role of leadership and

institutional priority factors (i.e., on-campus resources such as effective advising, access to financial aid, and campus safety) on their degree completion.

The importance of this study suggests that understanding student perceptions of satisfaction with intuitional priorities and college leadership could provide a unique perspective into understanding community college degree completion, therefore, helping educators, policymakers, and future researchers (Cetin & Kinik, 2016). College leadership includes but is not limited to the president, vice presidents, deans, associate deans, and directors. Research from this study may contribute to college degree completion literature. Additionally, results from this mixed-methods study may inform decision-making with higher education professionals.

Research shows that a correlation exists between leadership and student success (Davis et al., 2015; Gonzalez, 2015; B. McClenney, 2013; Tinto, 2012a), and in this study, the research intends to investigate the role further. The literature also shows that focus on college degree completion is relatively new within the last 20 years, whereas previously, the priority for colleges was enrollment and entry focused. A study in 2010 from the U.S. Department of Education tracked community college students through their first three years of college and discovered that only 20% graduated within those three years (Bailey, 2016). The U.S. Department of Education has documented the issue of low degree completion; however, questions remain as to factors influencing these rates.

Furthermore, examining the role of community colleges and their roles in student degree completion is particularly crucial because these institutions educate a large percentage of college students. According to fall 2015 data, approximately 41% of undergraduate students in the United States attended a community college (AACC, 2018). According to a projection from Complete College America (2011), a nonprofit organization that supports college degree

completion and reducing achievement gaps, by the year 2020, 60% of U.S. jobs will require some college education. This issue affects students not only at the national level but also within individual states across the country.

There are several reasons students attend community college, including access, affordability, and diversity of programs. Given the large population of students who attend community colleges across the United States, these institutions' impact on educating the public is tremendous. Community colleges typically offer open enrollment through an open-door policy, meaning anyone can enroll in the college. The open-door policy creates opportunities for students who might not attend college otherwise. Because of the importance of community colleges and their role in providing accessible education, administrators' efforts now focus on helping these institutions graduate a higher number of students (McNair et al., 2015). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2018) understands the importance of higher education for state residents, recommending that it improve and enrich individuals' lives in the community.

Characteristics of effective leadership are essential for this study within an institution: performance, impact, resilience, and longevity (Hines, 2011). Through these guiding principles, administrators and staff can impact student performance in college. This study showed the link between perceived leadership characteristics, through a student's satisfaction with institutional priorities, and a student's perceived ability to complete a degree. The existing research does not fully answer the correlation between perceived leadership qualities and college completion rates, although some research suggests that leadership is one of the most critical factors contributing to degree completion rates (B. McClenney, 2013).

Research Assumptions

Commensurate with qualitative research tradition, researchers identify assumptions about the topic of study (Creswell, 2012). In this section, I explain the background in relation to the research topic, sample population, and experiences related to the research assumptions. This process ensured that I was forthright in identifying existing beliefs and or understandings about the respective topic. In this mixed-methods study, I questioned students about the role of leadership on their ability to complete a degree based on their perceptions. I expected to find that some participants would perceive leadership as having an influence while others would not. Due to personal interpretation, I expected some variance in the responses. Individuals' perspectives shape their reality, and each participant's reality is different.

In my experience, community college students often express frustrations during the time to complete their degrees. For many students, changes to degree programs, changing expectations, and different answers from different personnel can lead to the student ultimately giving up before completing their degree. At the organizational level, administrative position changes mid-semester, conflicting values with cultures, and fragmented departments can result in a disservice to the students. In my experience, students often receive conflicting information from college staff, as relayed by department leadership teams. In some cases, the department leaders may decide to change requirements to degree programs without adequately communicating changes to students. As a result, when students hear the information from advisors, they can be unprepared to add time to their degree or find out a class they took previously no longer counts towards their program.

In other instances, students may also receive conflicting information from financial aid advisors, admissions personnel, and academic advisors. In my experience, receiving different

information from each department can confuse students, and in some cases, cause a student to forgo completion of their degree. For some community colleges, these problems are due to difficulties in communication at the leadership level. When administrators do not establish expectations and communicate with staff and students, information can be lost and misinterpreted. This problem of fragmented departments and miscommunication can hinder students because of the confusion it can cause. Many students lose their motivation to complete their degrees when they do not understand the expectations set upon them.

By contrast, effective leadership has the potential to improve communications between staff and students. When administrators, staff, and faculty work collaboratively, communicate openly and operate with transparency, it is more likely that messaging across the campus will be consistent, and as a result, students will understand expectations. When students understand the expectations for their degree program, they can efficiently work towards their goals. Additionally, in a college with effective leadership, departments should communicate consistent guidelines and policies and reduce the chance a student will receive inaccurate information.

Tinto's theory of student departure, established in 1975 and revisited by Braxton (2000), explains the relationship between the student experience and leadership through an interactionist approach. This theory posits that the student will have unique interactions with the institution that will lead to their ability to stay in or drop out of college within the framework of their personal circumstances. In conjunction with the critical race theory and interactionist theory, I assumed that a systems/complexity theory would frame the overarching relationship between the student and their interactions with the institution, as community colleges are dynamic institutions.

I assumed that organizational leadership would influence students' ability to be successful in completing a degree from a community college. The lens from which the research questions find their basis is personal experiences with community college students. Lastly, the study's design, mixed methods, provides flexibility to explore the research questions from an inquisitive standpoint and open the research to take direction based on subsequent findings and collect data from participants.

The main ideas I studied are students' perceptions of leadership at their institution and its role in their degree completion. This study uses a critical race theory lens to frame the student's experiences as community college students and understand their involvement in their degree completion. Using this lens, I assumed that not all students would have the same experiences as students who studied at traditional, four-year institutions for various reasons. I assumed departments and divisions of the college share roles of leadership.

Delimitations

I aimed to answer select research questions within an established population through this study. A delimitation of the study is that I only considered one community college district, with multiple campuses, in a southwestern state. The research questions are delimited to focus on college completion rates, not other aspects of student success, like retention in between semesters. Delimited objectives of the research study include perceived leadership qualities of administrators and staff on the college campus, as the purpose of the study is to find correlations between these qualities and college completion. The qualitative research questions only focused on perceived relationships between administrators, staff, and students from the student's perspective.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout the dissertation. The definitions are included to clarify how these terms are identified in the research study.

Community colleges. Institutions of higher education typically provide workforce and academic degree and certificate programs. Community colleges often offer classes at the freshman and sophomore level, making them the first two years of a student's higher education. The highest degree awarded is often an associate degree (i.e., approximately 60 credit hours), 42 credits of core classes, and 18 hours of electives (Kilgore & Wilson, 2017).

Completion. Refers to the act of having a fully conferred degree, which meets all requirements set forth by the institution granting the degree or diploma. This study primarily focused on community colleges; therefore, the term degree refers to an associate degree unless otherwise specified (Bailey, 2016).

Departure. For this study, departure refers to a student's action of dropping out, stopping, or quitting a degree pursued initially. When a student departs college, they are no longer actively pursuing their associate degree (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (2012a) suggested that many factors can lead to student departure, which is the student's choice to "leave higher education altogether" (p. 118).

Higher education leaders/leadership. Leaders in higher education include but are not limited to the president, vice president, chancellor, vice-chancellor, provost, vice provost, deans, associate deans, directors, and chairs.

Leadership. In this study, I define leadership as motivation through management or individual decision that encourages others to achieve their potential, mission, and goals, both personally and of the institution (Hines, 2011). Leadership in this study refers to roles within

staff and administrators at a community college district. Staff and administrators that engage in collaborative practices to promote student success within their organization are a part of a vision of shared leadership (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Organizational culture. This term refers to the assumptions shared by a group, often led by the group leader. Many of the thoughts, beliefs, and actions shared by the group may be because of socialization. The group shares these ideas and creates an environment within the organization (Schein, 2010).

Persistence. This term refers to a student enrolling in the subsequent semester. Students persist in college when they stay enrolled from one semester to the next without stopping out or departing (Belfield et al., 2014). Tinto (2012a) defined persistence as a way to measure students who start college at any point in the semester and continue to the next semester, regardless of if it is at the same institution.

Resistance. Resistance behaviors consist of actions students take to combat influence by their instructors. These behaviors can include criticizing their instructor, arguing with the instructor in front of others, and being hostile or dismissive when a teacher requests items (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011).

Student support services. This term refers to on-campus departments designed to support students, including academic advising, admissions, and financial aid. Some campuses include student life and engagement, TRIO, counseling, tutoring, and library services.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews degree completion in the areas of data, factors, barriers, and promotion. Additionally, I addressed satisfaction and institutional priorities as components of student success and higher education leadership styles. I have examined the existing research to determine if a link exists between leadership and degree completion. In many cases, the research established commonly found characteristics of effective leadership and institutional traits that can improve student success. The purpose of this mixed-methods study research was to describe the perceptions of students on the satisfaction of institutional priorities and the role of leadership, if any, on degree completion in a North Texas community college district. This literature review discusses the existing research on community college students, degree completion, leadership, and student success.

Data on Low Degree Completion

Low degree completion is a problem in higher education at the national level in the United States (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Bailey, 2016; Gonzalez, 2015). A critical element of assessing degree completion is the number of students who do not complete a degree. According to Habley et al. (2012), the study of student persistence has challenged researchers for over forty years while resulting in modest findings. Additionally, college non-completers have stumped researchers for nearly seventy years. Jacob (2018) suggested that nationally only 20% of students who start at a community college will complete a degree or certificate. Degree completion is critical because many well-paying jobs require an associate degree or higher. According to Gee et al. (2015), over 60% of jobs in the current market require a college degree, and in many cases, companies turn to hire students from out of the country to fill jobs that require higher education. Therefore, the United States faces a need for more college completion.

Another critical point is that individuals with some level of a college degree will make an average of 74% more in their income than those with a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2013). A college degree is good for more than just the economy. Gee et al. (2015) suggested there are positive social effects, such as college completers having higher voter turnout and generally being in better physical condition.

Specifically, this issue affects community colleges at the state level in Texas (THECB, 2015). As of the present, the Lumina Foundation (2017) records a Texas' degree attainment to be around 37%. This number has increased by 8% over the last 10 years. However, this number is still not enough to reach the THECB's goal of 60%. Forty-five percent of students who start a degree program at a community college in Texas will not complete their degree in three years, which can lead to social impacts such as a lack of consumer spending in the economy, and the students' inability to improve their standard of living (Ishitani, 2006; Yu, 2015). In Texas, the problem of low college degree completion is so alarming that policymakers created an agenda to nearly double the number of degrees awarded in the state, referred to as the 60X30TX Higher Education Strategic Plan (THECB, 2015). Texas is ranked 31st regarding degree completion across the United States, making it one of the lower degree-producing areas of the country (The National Center for Higher Education, 2021). THECB hopes to increase the state's ranking and improve degree attainment by a substantial margin by 2030. The goal is to raise college degree completion to 60% of Texas residents ages 25 to 34 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015).

Reasons for Low Degree Completion

Jacob (2018) identified reasons for low degree completion, which include: (a) underprepared students typically take remedial courses that add time to their respective degree,

and (b) students may work to afford off-campus expenses and the cost of tuition. Community colleges can serve many students from marginalized groups, including low-income families (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). College Board Advocacy and Training Center (2010) identified several characteristics of students who are most likely to drop out of college, including low-income, minority, or first-generation students. Furthermore, they suggest that 60% of students from these categories who do not complete college will drop out after their first year (College Board Advocacy & Training Center, 2010).

According to Davis et al. (2015), many community college students are students at nontraditional college-age. Students identified as marginalized or nontraditional can be as high as 85% of students enrolled in community college programs (Gillett-Karam, 2016). Different factors contribute to a student's inability to complete a college degree, including taking developmental coursework, taking classes that do not count towards their degree program, enrolling intermittently, and not understanding what credits will count toward their degree program (Belfield et al., 2014).

Time to Degree Completion

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016) conducted a study that suggests the average time for a student to complete an associate degree is about 3.3 years and that less than 8% of students will complete an associate degree in two years. This National Student Clearinghouse study suggests that to be considered on time, and on average, most students should take between two and four years to complete a degree from a community college. However, another source suggests that only 39% of community college students will complete their degree within six years (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016).

Ishitani (2006) pointed to several reasons why the time to degree can take longer for some students, including the number of credits students enroll in and using financial aid. Bailey (2016), Gillett-Karam (2016), and Ishitani (2006) pointed to the role of developmental coursework in time to graduation, with the number of developmental classes needed positively correlated to lack of degree completion.

Barriers to Degree Completion

Many factors act as barriers to student success. Countless students who start courses at a community college are underprepared academically and may not start at the college level. Instead, they are required to take developmental courses (Bailey, 2016). The need for more degree completion is evident when considering the degree gap between jobs and required qualifications as the degree gap increases, serving previously marginalized groups, such as low-income and first-generation students (Handel, 2013). Understanding degree completion is fundamental for economic reasons and comprehending a part of the student experience. Students have different motivations and experiences that can affect their decisions to leave college before completing a degree. The Habley Retention Model points to eight metrics for reasons students may not complete a degree, including institutional mismatch, boredom, personal problems, and financial needs (Habley et al., 2012).

Bailey (2016) found that several barriers to student success are institutional, including sparse resources, loose structure of programs, overburdened advisors, and little oversight of degree progress. One of the problems for community colleges is that nearly half of students who enroll will leave within their first year (Yu, 2015). One of the significant variations in priorities for community colleges over the last two decades is the increased attention from access to completion (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Bailey, 2016). Before the

paradigm shift, most college administrators focused on enrollment and access for new students. Within the last decade, B. McClenney (2013) pointed out the major shift from enrollment towards completion regarding awarding degrees and graduation. The completion agenda facing most community college leaders today focuses on interventions to retain students throughout the entirety of their associate degrees. B. McClenney (2013) believed that nothing short of institutional transformation could help community colleges achieve their completion goals. K. McClenney (2013) agreed that before community colleges can meet their goals of higher degree completion, everything will have to change. Levesque (2018) pointed to structural barriers affecting community college completion rates, including unclear degree requirements, insufficient advising resources, and limited time for long-term degree planning.

Shifts in organizational culture, values, and practices may be required before an institution can genuinely transform. The AACC (2012) recommends several changes from outdated thinking to a framework that can help future community college students be successful, including clear pathways, a culture of collaboration, collective responsibility, and a focus on student success. These shifts move away from fragmented course selection, a culture of isolation, and focus solely on getting students into college (AACC, 2012; K. McClenney, 2013). Smith et al. (2015) reported that many colleges have risen to the challenge of increasing completion rates and have implemented innovative programs that have had an impact over the last decade. However, Smith et al. (2015) contended that progress has been slow, and the research is inconclusive as to why completion rates have not increased over the last decade dramatically.

Promotion of Degree Completion by Colleges

Students may complete or not complete a degree program for different reasons, but amongst the concerns for institutions include their reputation and potential financing. Therefore,

most colleges and institutions have policies and procedures to ensure students who start at their institution receive the tools they need to complete a degree (Aljohani, 2016).

Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) recommended that to foster student success, community college leaders should promote first-year seminar courses, even making them mandatory if possible. Hatch (2016) agreed that several high-impact practices could improve student success rates within community colleges. These practices include first-year seminars and courses, new student orientation, learning communities, and specially created accelerated developmental courses (K. McClenney, 2013; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2016; Tinto, 2012). Conversely, Gillett-Karam (2016) struggled to find continuity in defining student success and believes efforts to measure it has been vague and inconclusive because of the lack of consistency in determining what constitutes success. Habley et al. (2012) also struggled to limit student success to just one definition. In their words, “defining retention, attrition, and persistence and the constructs related to those terms is fraught with pitfalls and complexity” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 3).

Many community colleges employ completion initiatives aimed at increasing the number of students who complete a degree. Kilgore and Wilson (2017) identified some of the more prevalent initiatives used across the United States as being connected to specific student cohorts, such as first-generation students or students placed into developmental courses. Belfield et al. (2014) offered a simple suggestion to raise student degree completion: increase awareness so that students are only taking the classes they need to complete their academic awards. Other standard practices include implementing success coaching or mandatory advising (Kilgore & Wilson, 2017). Additionally, requiring an orientation, course placement exams, and creating guided

degree pathways with an advisor were standard student engagement processes at community colleges in the United States (Kilgore & Wilson, 2017).

The AACU (2015a) suggested there is a shift in the definition of success and that it is no longer limited to a student's grades but rather their level of preparedness for participating in higher education and contributing to the economy. They recommend that college leaders implement specific standards to ensure all students can access the tools they need to succeed (AACU, 2015a). This initiative can include setting clear standards and goals for completing a degree, providing support services like advising to help students achieve their academic goals, and exploring high-impact practices that work best for each campus (AACU, 2015a).

College Student Satisfaction and Institutional Priorities

Student satisfaction refers to the congruence between a student's expectations of the college they attend and its ability to meet their expectations. The more the college can meet the student's expectations, the higher their satisfaction with that college. Institutions measure student satisfaction to determine if the quality of their services to students is adequate, or fails to meet expectations, or goes above them (Sears et al., 2017). Students have a choice when selecting a college to attend, so many colleges consider satisfaction a critical factor when developing programs that affect the student body. Student satisfaction with institutional priority factors, such as advising, has been linked to higher student retention and persistence (Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015), ultimately leading to degree completion. Institutional priorities, a term coined by Ruffalo Noel Levitz, measure the priorities of an institution of higher education as scale items, including student-centeredness and service excellence (Noel Levitz, 2018). The RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series reviews congruence between an institution's ability to meet a student's expectation and show what institutional practices are a priority, hence becoming an

institutional priority. This research aims to turn data about student satisfaction from the RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series into action in terms of a student's perceived ability to complete a degree.

A college can assess student satisfaction with institutional practices to measure how likely a student may persist with an institution, ultimately leading to retention (Turklich et al., 2014). Some researchers in higher education are looking at how students make decisions about college in the same way they make consumer decisions and equate their satisfaction to increase brand loyalty and the customer relationship (Hrnjic, 2016; Vander Schee, 2011). In this model, colleges can view institutional factors, like new student advising and special first-semester programming, as potential avenues that can lead to satisfaction will then ideally increase the rate of student retention (Vander Schee, 2011). The key is to identify and invest in the institutional factors that lead to the greatest satisfaction. Hrnjic (2016) followed that this type of customer relationship management mindset puts institutions in a position to ensure retention by meeting the student's needs beyond adequately.

Eom and Ashill (2016) further confirmed the importance of student satisfaction in an empirical research study focused on satisfaction in an online learning environment and explored how interactions with the professor can significantly affect a student's overall approval with their institution. To increase student satisfaction, which can lead to improved retention, an institution must focus on providing quality services, especially in areas with which students have high contact, such as their instructors or advisors (Eom & Ashill, 2016; Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). As students interact with their institution, they develop a sense of their importance to the college and formulate assumptions about their abilities based on direct experiences with just one or two

college personnel. The more satisfied a student is with their academic advising experiences, the more positive the correlation is to retention and persistence rates (Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015).

Higher Education Leadership

Within every institution of higher education is a leadership team established to shape policy, create processes, and serve students. Leaders in a community college setting typically include directors, associate deans, academic deans, vice presidents, and a president. These leadership teams are at the forefront of the student experience. Enrollment in community colleges has been a top priority for college leaders, but now there is a shift towards completion. However, Gonzalez (2015) found that the research on student success in community colleges is still enrollment-driven and not all focused solely on completion for many institutions. Leadership has a role in college completion. Gonzalez (2015) recommended that institutions recognize the following critical components as best practices within their programs: a culture of innovation and change, communicating data findings and information, and establishing an appropriate scale of student participants for interventions.

While a high number of students enroll in community college each year, an alarmingly low number will finish with a conferred degree. Recent pressures from statewide initiatives call on community college leaders to determine how institutional action can affect degree completion (THECB, 2015; Tinto, 2012). This study will explore student perceptions of leadership on degree completion rates. Researchers have found that reasons for low degree completion in community colleges range from personal to institutional (Bailey, 2016; Gillett-Karam, 2016; Ishitani, 2006). Researchers have studied factors of student success, pointing to actions college leaders can take to improve student retention and graduation (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Hatch, 2016; K. McClenney, 2013; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2016; Tinto, 2012). However, few researchers have

directly studied the role of leadership on student success rates (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Gonzalez, 2015). The role of leadership regarding degree completion remains a question for researchers. Even though some researchers have established a correlation between institutional leadership and student success (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011; Cetin & Kinik, 2016), very few studies have focused on exploring these relationships amongst community college students, college staff, and administrators to determine possible trends.

Even fewer have studied the link between student satisfaction and degree completion. In a research study conducted 10 years ago, Schreiner (2009) mentioned that there was little empirical research connecting student satisfaction with student success, even though there are compelling reasons why it should be studied. Schreiner's research with over 60 colleges and universities found that satisfaction was a critical predictor of student retention. Certain institutional priority factors had an even higher ability to predict student retention, including creating an inviting campus climate (Schreiner, 2009). I found that little additional research shows the relationship between student satisfaction and success (specifically retention and degree completion), making this study of utmost importance for college administrators.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (2015b) created guidelines for college leaders to help support students struggling to complete their college degrees, especially in underserved areas. One action leaders can be aware of is the specific needs of their student population and predict resources they may require in the future (AACU, 2015b). College leaders should have honest conversations within the college about supporting underserved students who may otherwise feel marginalized and practicing cultural competency (AACU, 2015b).

Within the various studies on leadership, research on the use of charismatic leadership within a college setting suggests it can reduce student resistance factors (Bolkan & Goodboy,

2011). Charismatic leadership refers to an individual who can inspire and motivate others to change their actions and behaviors based on their vision and extraordinary qualities (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011). According to Campbell et al. (2010), the mark of a competent leader includes emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and empathy. The top characteristics of effective community college leadership, according to the AACC, include organizational strategy, resource management, and communication (Campbell et al., 2010).

Another approach to examining leadership effectiveness is the balanced leadership framework, in which the individual balances external and internal values within the educational system (Cetin & Kinik, 2016). The balanced leadership framework also promotes critical responsibilities, including culture, communication, relationships, and affirmation (Cetin & Kinik, 2016). McNair et al. (2015) advised that defining shared goals and approaching problems intentionally and systematically can improve student outcomes from a leadership perspective.

Components of Higher Education Leadership

There are many components of higher education leadership, which start by addressing the function of leadership in higher education. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) simplistically defined higher education leadership as a process of social influence. Positions of leadership include directors, dean's, associate dean's, vice presidents, and presidents of the college. The efforts and outcomes of these practices by people in these positions can occur organically as often as they are planned, be formal or informal, and include both verbal and nonverbals (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017).

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2012), leadership is one of the crucial components of the change needed for community colleges to meet student success goals. The AACC proposes that commitment to strategic goals and

collaboration across the entire institution should prioritize community colleges to enact any change in degree completion and retention. Over the last decade, there has been an impending leadership crisis as many community college leaders retire without adequately trained individuals available to replace them (Forthun & Freeman, 2017). Forthun and Freeman (2017) confirmed that because of the differences in two-year and four-year institutions, leadership training precisely centered on the community college experience is necessary. Along with adequately trained professionals, colleges have tried different intervention strategies to increase student success via leadership. A coalition of colleges organized a movement towards college degree completion in 2004 and found that some of the factors to help propel their transformational agenda included committed leadership, evidence-based improvements to existing programs, and engagement within the college community, including faculty, staff, and students (B. McClenney, 2013).

The position of faculty members plays a significant role in the degree completion process for students. Faculty engagement is an essential component of the overall leadership culture of the college (Gonzalez, 2015). Strong leadership from the administrative level should embrace and encourage faculty engagement in the student success process (Gonzalez, 2015).

Additionally, Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) suggested that instructors should develop trusting relationships with marginalized students as a best practice.

One of the most important relationships a student can have on campus is with student support services staff, including an academic advisor, who helps them create and follow a degree plan. The academic advisor plays a critical role in connecting the student to the institution and can ultimately affect their success by taking the correct courses (Vianden, 2016). Smith et al. (2015) proposed that when academic advisors use extensive and frequent contact methods with

students, they can influence the likelihood that students will utilize student support services and receive institutional attention.

Administrators often have the challenge of making decisions that will affect all aspects of the institution. Hornak and Garza Mitchell (2016) studied the ways college presidents make decisions and found that some administrators make decisions based on personal values but complement the institutional mission. Administrators' values could have a significant impact on the organizational culture. Community college presidents often make difficult decisions, but their ultimate responsibility is to make the best choice, not necessarily the most popular options, to serve their faculty, staff, and students (Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016).

Looking at the future of higher education leadership, Mrig and Sanaghan (2017) recommended a specific skill set for success. These skills include being able to anticipate and make sense of fast-moving trends, being tolerant of risk and failure, having humility, and connecting with others across cultures (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017). Other recommended skills include courageous decision-making, resilience, improvisation, and having a clear sense of meaning and purpose (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017). These skills set the standard for effective leaders in higher education for success at the institutional level.

Research Study Conceptual Framework

Theories and Approaches Undergirding the Conceptual Framework

There are many different theories used to understand student development, student success, and student completion rates. Researchers use different frameworks to make sense of the student-learning environment and consider different lenses to make their assertions. After exploring the various theories on leadership and degree completion, I identified three theories

that will comprise the conceptual framework for this research study, specifically: interactionalist approaches of student departure, complexity leadership theory, and critical race theory.

At the center of this framework is Tinto's seminal and landmark research (1975) on student departure identified the problems both students and administrators face when students do not complete degree programs. Tinto's modern theory of student departure considers the importance of institutional action on student degree completion and retention (Tinto, 2012a). Tinto's research suggests that the issue of student degree completion has been a point of interest to researchers for at least the last 40 years. Some of the reasons for low rates of degree completion over the years include reduced resources available at the college, remediation requirements, changing majors and taking classes that are not required, and rising college costs (Shapiro et al., 2016).

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

One way to understand the relationship between the student experience and leadership is through an interactionalist approach to Tinto's Theory of student departure (1975). This theory posits that the student will have unique interactions with the institution that will lead to their ability to stay in or drop out of college in combination with their personal circumstances. Tinto's theory of student departure considers a broad range of factors influencing their decision to leave college without completing a degree, including family, environment, gender, race, and academic ability (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 2012a). Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure raises some of the concerns educators have grappled with historically through the present. His theory suggests that students decide to depart or drop out of college for different reasons. Two central systems that cause departure include social and academic (Aljohani, 2016). Students must be assimilated into both systems to be successful college students, including grade performance for academics

and campus social involvement (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto considers an interactionist approach to understanding student retention and departure (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Tinto's modern theory (2012a) rethinks the importance of institutional action in connection with student departure and examines ways college leaders can create an environment conducive to student success.

Tinto (2017a) has monitored student persistence and engagement as part of his professional career throughout the last several decades. Reflections that are more recent capture the nuances of student and institutional needs. Tinto asks leaders in higher education to consider that what a student needs to be successful may look different from what they as an institution. Namely, while colleges are focused on retaining students, students are focused on how to persist (Tinto, 2017a). The subtleties lie in the nomenclature, as persistence requires motivation and action while being "retained" can be passive. To allow a student to persist, the college needs to create an engaging atmosphere and provide a sense of community and belonging (Tinto, 2017a). The student's interactions within this community, including staff, administrators, faculty, and other students, directly contribute to their sense of belonging; and their ability to persist to the next and final semester (Tinto, 2017a). It is also important to point out the difference between persistence and resistance because the institution invests in the same student staying at their college semester to semester, while the student may want to get a degree, even if it is not from the institution with which they started (Tinto, 2017b). Tinto points out that student experiences relate to the expectations they hold for themselves, as modeled by the institution. If the college does not expect a lot from them, they will follow suit and underperform by either not studying enough or challenging themselves (Tinto, 2012b). Additionally, institutional factors again have a significant impact on their engagement; the more a student is involved, the more likely they are to continue in classes from one semester to the next (Tinto, 2012b).

Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity leadership theory is adaptive, based on the leader's experiences and responses to the environment (Davis et al., 2015). Additionally, researchers view leadership as a collaborative trait through the systems thinking approach, not one of the individuals (Davis et al., 2015). The community college landscape is increasingly complex as administrators must meet enrollment and completion goals, graduate productive members of society, and stretch funding on often underresourced departments.

Critical Race Theory

Researchers use critical race theory (CRT), which provides alternatives to common ideologies in education about social justice, race, and students' experiences (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Critical race theory gained momentum in the 1970s as a response to inaction in the U.S. legal system towards understanding racial inequality in the context of civil rights (Zorn, 2018). By the 1980s, academics started to use critical race theory to explain education disparities between White and non-White students (Zorn, 2018). Some of the findings to account for achievement gaps between White students and students of color suggest that institutions of higher education encourage White students by design and that the curriculum and pedagogy cater to White students, and instructors have inherently higher expectations of White students, therefore leaving students of color at an institutional disadvantage (Zorn, 2018). Hiraldo (2019) suggested that no matter how hard higher education tries to be inclusive for students of all racial and cultural backgrounds, the system is inherently broken and favors White students and individuals who experience White privilege whether they are aware of it or not. According to Hiraldo (2019), CRT is a way to give a voice to individuals from marginalized groups in the context of the predominantly White paradigm that higher education has historically followed.

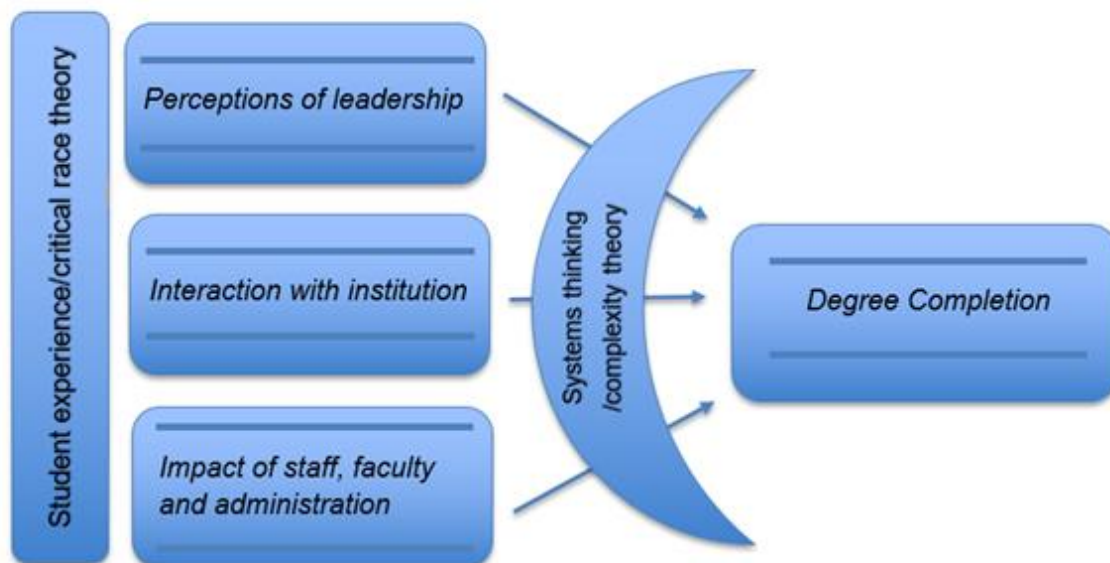
Specifically, Gillett-Karam (2016) claimed that conventional student development models fail to capture the experience of modern-day community college students. I selected this lens to capture the unique experiences of community college students. Additionally, community college students are more likely to originate from marginalized or minority groups than students at four-year universities (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Davis et al., 2015; Gillett-Karam, 2016).

Usage of the Conceptual Framework in the Design of the Research Study

In this study, I applied Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure (1975) and complexity leadership theory through a critical race theory lens (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016) to understand the perceptions of community college students on leadership and degree completion. The systems thinking complexity theory creates a framework from which I recognized the role of leadership within the institution's operation. The conceptual framework explains the main dynamics between the students, the role of leadership, and degree completion tied to the three theories. The graphic depicts the intersection of the three theories as applied to the problem of practice. First, I used the critical race theory lens to explain differences in student experiences. I looked at facets of the experience through CRT, including aspects of the student departure theory: perceptions, interactions, and impacts within the institution. I filtered these aspects through a systems thinking approach, which I believed ultimately affects students' experience of degree completion (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Graphical Framework of Student Interactions and Experiences



Note. This figure shows the theoretical interplay of the student experience, combined with perceptions and interactions within the institution and the relationship to degree completion.

The main ideas I studied are the students' perceptions of institutional priority factors at their institution, students' satisfaction with institutions and experiences, and community college leaderships' role on degree completion. This study uses the concepts and model provided in Figure 1 to frame the student's experiences as community college students and understand their involvement in their degree completion. Using this lens, I assumed that not all students would have the same experiences as students who studied at traditional, four-year institutions for various reasons. I framed the overarching relationship between the student and their interactions with the institution through interactionist theory and complexity leadership theory in conjunction with the critical race theory.

This conceptual framework determines the lens when analyzing the data. It is essential to establish a framework from which to construct assumptions, “beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research –is a key part of your design” (Maxwell, 2012). The use of this theory reflects my values and beliefs, and it uses an intersection of theories to create a cohesive and genuine study. According to Collins and Stockton (2018), the very purpose of a theoretical framework is to combine my values, ideas about existing knowledge, and a methodological approach to processing new knowledge.

Summary

Due to the lack of research, many studies call for future efforts to investigate the relationship between leadership and college completion (AACC, 2012; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011; Davis et al., 2015). In this study, I hoped to contribute to the scholarly research by determining perceptions of students, staff, and college administrators of a community college district in North Texas. This study could improve leadership practices at institutions, which can ultimately affect students positively. Results of this study could help community college leaders develop new policies, student interventions, professional development opportunities, or even influence decision-making at the organizational level.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to examine the perceptions of community college students' focusing on their satisfaction of institutional priority factors and the role of leadership on their abilities to complete a degree. I primarily considered full-time students at a community college district in a southwestern state. This study explored a perceived relationship between leadership and degree completion by using previously administrated student survey responses, a currently administered survey, and one-on-one interviews with students. The quantitative guiding research questions and qualitative research questions undergirding this study follow.

Quantitative Research Questions

RQ1: What institutional priority factors, as measured by scale items, do students at a community college district in North Texas perceive to be most effective?

RQ2: What institutional priority factors, as measured by scale items, do students at a community college district in North Texas perceive to be least effective?

RQ3: Are there differences in satisfaction of overall experience and the perceived priority of the institution for a student to complete a degree based on gender and race/ethnicity at a community college district in North Texas?

Qualitative Research Questions

RQ4: What aspects of a student's enrollment and matriculation experiences most impact community college degree completion?

RQ5: How do college leadership and student support services impact community college students' degree completion?

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. For the quantitative aspect of the study, the dependent variables were overall experience and priority of the institution for a student to complete a degree. The independent variables are gender and race/ethnicity. I analyzed student perceptions based on the 2020 SSI institutional data set. The survey reveals information that the university can measure how well they are servicing students' academic and support needs. I used descriptive statistics to determine institutional priorities students find most and least effective while completing their degree program based on responses to the SSI using gap scores, which measure the distance between importance and satisfaction. I used demographic data to see differences in satisfaction based on student gender and race/ethnicity.

The qualitative aspect of the study included a virtual online interview with students to examine their perceptions of the institution's priority factors and the role of leadership on their degree completion. Through qualitative data collection, I analyzed responses from student participants to find common themes in the relationship of leadership to student degree completion.

Table 1*Guiding Research Questions Sources of Data*

Guiding research question	Instruments/protocols	Participant types	Data sources	Statistical tests
Quantitative questions				
RQ1: What institutional priority factors, as measured by scale items, do students at a community college district in North Texas perceive to be most effective?	Ruffalo Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI)	Students	North College District Secondary Data Set of Student Satisfaction Inventory (2020)	Descriptive statistics
RQ2: What institutional priority factors, as measured by scale items, do students at a community college district in North Texas perceive to be least effective?	Ruffalo Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI)	Students	North College District Secondary Data Set of Student Satisfaction Inventory (2020)	Descriptive statistics
RQ3: Are there differences in satisfaction of overall experience and the perceived priority of the institution for a student to complete a degree based on gender and race/ethnicity at a community college district	Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol: Survey Questions	Students	Qualtrics survey	Descriptive Statistics: Frequency tables, crosstabulation

Guiding research question	Instruments/protocols	Participant types	Data sources	Statistical tests
in North Texas?				
Guiding Research Question	Instruments/Protocols	Participant Types	Data Sources	
	Qualitative questions			
RQ4: What aspects of a student's enrollment and matriculation experiences most impact community college degree completion?	Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol: Survey and Interview Questions	Students	Online/Digital interviews using Zoom Qualtrics Survey	
RQ5: How do college leadership and student support services impact community college students' degree completion?	Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol: Survey and Interview Questions	Students	Online/Digital interviews using Zoom Qualtrics Survey	

The following sections of this chapter introduce the design of the study, the population and sampling process, assessment instruments used, and analysis procedures. Additionally, I addressed information regarding ethical considerations, assumptions, and delimitations in the sections to follow.

Research Design and Method

According to Creswell (2014), mixed-methods studies refer to a conglomeration between quantitative and qualitative data research. This mixed-methods study intended to determine perceptions of students towards degree completion. Mixed-methods research was the chosen

research method because this allowed me to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the participants to explore the phenomenon of low degree completion in community colleges. I collected both survey results indicating student perceptions and open-ended questions from students through conducting one-on-one virtual interviews.

I used mixed methods to explain and interpret perceptions of college leadership and its role in student degree completion. This study followed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, meaning the researcher collects both qualitative and quantitative data separately then compares the results to confirm or disprove assumptions (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2014), “the key assumption of this approach is that both qualitative and quantitative data provide different types of information—often detailed views of participants qualitatively and scores on instruments quantitatively—and together they yield results that should be the same” (p. 219). This study employed a mixed-methods approach to gather this information, a detailed view of participants from one-on-one interviews, and scores on the SSI instrument.

Quantitative Research Data Collection

Based on the review of previous instruments used to collect data on student degree completion, I have chosen to obtain permission to use the data set from the SSI institutional data set given to students in the spring of 2020. RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series by Noel Levitz (2018) created the SSI, and the company assures validity and reliability. The college administered the SSI institutional data set to over 10,000 randomly sampled students with a 6.9% response rate.

The term Noel Levitz uses for the student population is satisfaction, while the term for the employee group is institutional priorities. The SSI instrument assesses perceptions on items

in the series and asks students if they are satisfied with (or not) items under the institutional priorities.

According to a 2005 statistic, nearly one out of every ten students in the United States will complete the SSI while attending college (Bryant, 2006). Additionally, according to Bryant (2006), through the years, the company has conducted validity and reliability studies, and the instrument is “tested and proven statistically reliable” (p. 28). I used the data set from this quantitative instrument to analyze data from student responses. The RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series (2018) has several instruments assessing the same concepts but tailored to specific participant types to gain information about the respective institution. For this study, I only considered data from the SSI (for student populations).

I obtained the SSI of the RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series (2018) that the college sent to a random sample of student participants in the spring of 2020. The SSI contains 40 questions in a web-based survey. These questions also ask Likert-scale questions about importance and agreement with statements. RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series (2018) created both surveys for use simultaneously with community college populations. I used the responses from the 2020 SSI to find the institutional priority factors that students perceived to be most and least effective.

The RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Assessments™ Series contain 12 scale items, including Student Centeredness, Instructional Effectiveness, Responsiveness to Diverse Populations, Safety and Security, Academic Advising/Counseling, Admissions and Financial Aid, Academic Services, Campus Support Services, Registration Effectiveness, Service Excellence, Campus Climate, and Concern for the Individual. Students answered Likert scale questions to express their perception of importance for each category. I determined the standard deviation and gap of

the results compared to total participants at the college and compared them to the national averages. I then used descriptive statistics to determine scale items that students perceived to be most effective and least effective at the institution.

Operational Terms Supporting the Guiding Research Questions

The operational terms and definitions used to develop the guiding research questions are included below. The terms frame the research questions in this study.

Community College Leadership/Leadership Competencies

This refers to standards set by the American Association of Community Colleges (2018) in student success, organizational culture, institutional leadership, and collaboration. The AACC (2018) standards build on the assumption that student success is a universal goal for community college leaders to increase completion rates while also considering the transformative quality of community colleges, which society often looks upon to produce more graduates with fewer resources. The leadership competencies from the AACC set the standard for leadership qualities that I considered in this study. Community college leadership positions considered in this study include directors, associate deans, deans, vice presidents, and college presidents.

Leadership

Tinto (2012a) implied that leadership is essential to students' success and that institutional action is a critical factor in ensuring gains in completion rates. This study aimed to quantify these claims and determine the correlation between the two. Understanding the link between leadership at the community college level and low degree completion rates to help the state move forward in economic development, an individual standard of living, and enriching both the students and the state (THEBC, 2015). Leadership at the community college level can transform underperforming schools (those with low rates of degree completion) and help give

students the resources they need to be successful and ultimately finish a degree, such as planning a course of study and goal setting, degree tracking, and proactive advising through the degree process (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015b). Therefore, this study intended to view the problem of low rates of degree completion through the student's perspectives with the hope of examining the perceived role leadership plays on a student's ability to graduate with an associate degree.

Student Degree Completion

Degree completion rates include first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students enrolled in the fall or summer before the academic year. Degree completion or a degree completer is a student who is awarded a degree within 150% of the average time to complete the degree (typically two years, so three years total). I did not include students who transferred out of the institution in the degree completion rate. For each academic year, the college tracks a cohort for three years (150% of the time to complete), and the number of students who finish a degree in that time is considered degree completers. The study site reports a numerical value “n” and a percentage of degree completion rates.

Student Satisfaction

The Noel Levitz (2018) Student Satisfaction Survey used to measure student satisfaction with institutional priority factors was emailed to a random sample of over 10,000 students in 2020. Of that group, just under 800 students completed the survey, for a 6.9% response rate. I used data from this secondary source to analyze student satisfaction of areas they found most and least effective. The SSI has 40 questions in total, each measured on a Likert scale of seven points from not satisfied at all to very satisfied. The 40 questions relate to institutional priority factors, including student centeredness, instructional effectiveness, safety and security, academic

advising effectiveness, admissions and financial aid effectiveness, campus services, registration effectiveness, and campus climate (Noel Levitz, 2015). The seven satisfaction levels include not satisfied at all, not very satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, neutral, somewhat satisfied, satisfied, very satisfied, and very satisfied (Noel Levitz, 2015). Noel Levitz used an average score determined by responses to each of the 40 questions as an item report. Additionally, a scale report looks at each institutional priority factor as a group with an average satisfaction number derived from the average of all responses in each category. I used the gap scores measured by how a student ranks a priority factor regarding importance and satisfaction to determine if it is effective.

Student Perceptions

The definition of student perception, according to the SSI, is how a student feels about certain aspects of the institution in their own subjective opinion. The Noel Levitz SSI measures student perceptions towards the institution through two variables, importance for the institution to meet an expectation and how satisfied the student is that the institution has met the expectation. There are 40 questions in total; the students rated both importance and satisfaction for each of the 40 items, using a Likert scale from one to seven. The Likert scale for importance includes not important at all, not very important, somewhat unimportant, neutral, somewhat important, important, and very important. The Likert scale for satisfaction includes not very satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, neutral, somewhat satisfied, satisfied, and very satisfied. The final report includes an importance score and a satisfaction score for each of the 40 questions.

Additionally, there is a score for each of the eight institutional priority factors. I took the mean (average) for each question's importance and satisfaction and calculated the total by adding the student's scores and dividing by the number of responses (Noel Levitz, 2015). This number

refers to the performance gap/gap score, which shows if a college is meeting or not meeting students' needs satisfactorily.

Student Support Services

Student support services are departments within an institution of higher education that provide support services to students. The main student support services considered for this study include academic advising/counseling, admissions, and financial aid. Typically, each department will have advisors or staff to assist the student complete an application for admission, updating their student account and documents, applying for financial aid, selecting a major, and registering for classes. Collectively, these services will be referred to as student support services as these are the departments a student at a community college would be most likely to directly interface with at the campus or virtually.

Qualitative Research Data Collection

In addition to analyzing quantitative data, I conducted one-on-one virtual interviews with selected students who have completed over 45 credit hours and enrolled in the current semester, based on voluntary participation after completing the online survey. I designed a qualitative interview protocol, the Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol (CCSIIP), based on the literature on student integration in the community college setting during the interviews with students (see Appendix C). Questions related to family involvement, academic integration, support from the college, and developing tools to balance personal and academic responsibilities are closely related to Tinto's student integration theory (Hlinka, 2017).

To select participants, I obtained permission from the college survey students via email. An administrator from the college filtered all currently enrolled students to determine my population based on my criteria. The administrator sent emails to all students enrolled in the

current semester (spring 2021) and have over 45 credit hours completed. Students who already had a degree completed or were employed by the college were not able to participate. An associate degree is approximately 60 credit hours, so a student who has 45 credits complete could indicate they may be in their last semester before they graduate with a degree. In the email sent on my behalf by the college administrator, the contents asked students if they were interested in completing an anonymous survey online and optionally signing up for a virtual interview about their experience at the college. The email included information stating that their participation is voluntary and followed all required language from the informed consent and IRB. In total, the college administrator sent over 3,400 emails to students eliciting their participation based on meeting the initial criteria I set.

During the one-on-one online interviews, I asked open-ended probing questions about the student's experience of completing their degree and how they think the college's leadership has influenced degree completion. I used the responses to answer two qualitative research questions after analyzing responses from students from the one-on-one interviews to determine how they think the college's leadership plays a role in their ability to complete their degrees. The two research questions are: What aspects of a student's enrollment and matriculation experiences most impact community college degree completion? In addition, how do college leadership and student support services impact community college students' degree completion?

In summary, a mixed-methods approach allowed me to understand students' perceptions to determine how leadership plays a role in community college students' ability to complete their degrees. According to Creswell (2014), mixed-methods research allows researchers to understand the research problem deeper by combining both types of data that provide different types of information. Creswell (2014) further promoted this research style as a viable research

option when "mixed methods is chosen because of its strength of drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research and minimizing the limitations of both approaches" (p. 218). Several disciplines now consider mixed methods research valuable because of its ability to result in a deeper understanding of some research questions (Creswell, 2014).

The site of this study has a large population and varied demographics. In the 2020-2021 year, there were over 32,000 total undergraduate students. At the time of the study, there were 42% male and 58% female students enrolled based on gender. The total Caucasian/White student population at the study site is approximately 46%, followed by 20% Hispanic, 12% Asian, and 12% African American. The largest group of students enrolled by age group is 18-22, which makes up 52% of the total enrollment at the college. The study site reports having 469 full-time faculty members, 908 part-time (adjunct) faculty members, 771 full-time staff and administrators, and 372 part-time staff members.

Target Population

The participants of this study included students of multiple campuses of a community college district in North Texas. Participants for the virtual interview included any full-time or part-time students enrolled in the current semester and had completed at least 45 credit hours. Students did not qualify if they were transient students who attended a four-year university and only took the course as additional credit. The district at the site of this study includes seven main campuses and four centers that do not have full student services offices. This study included any students who meet the criteria to receive an email for the interview: a minimum of 45 credit hours and current enrollment. Administrators of the institution showed support for my research and conducting the study with their students per a formal letter of support from the college. The institution understands the value of the data I collected and can potentially use it for future

programming. I followed all appropriate channels to collect IRB approval from the institutions before conducting any research and received IRB approval from both ACU and the study site (see Appendix C).

The current enrollment across seven main campuses is approximately 30,000 students. Participants in the study included individuals from all seven full-service campuses as they are all part of the same college district, which has only one accreditation. This study used a simple random sample from the entire student population. I identified the sample based on whether the student has completed at least 45 credit hours and enrolled in the current semester; then, a college administrator emailed those individuals. Any student who received the initial email had an equal chance of participating in the study.

Sample

Of the student population who fits the criteria for the virtual interview, I gave every student an equal opportunity to sign up for and complete the interview. Three thousand four hundred students fit the criteria of being enrolled in the spring 2021 semester and have over 45 credits completed; however, only four students volunteered to participate in the interview, and 25 completed the survey.

The college administered the SSI institutional set in 2020 to a representative sample of over 10,000 students. The college emailed the survey to every second student on the list of students who enrolled in the spring semester. Seven hundred and fifty-three students completed the SSI resulting in a 6.9% response rate. The college needed at least 600 responses to generalize the results to the student body as a whole, even though the average response rate of the SSI is approximately 10% to 30% (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). After receiving permission, I used the data collected from this survey on the report generated by Noel Levitz for the college.

Mixed Methods Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection happened in several stages, including using the SSI institutional data set, an online survey, and virtual interviews. I used an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design, starting with quantitative data collection to measure participants' responses and then follow up with qualitative data collection (Creswell, 2014). I collected information from the online survey, then conducted virtual interviews with a few students to further explain the phenomena in detail. There were several steps to analyzing and interpreting the resulting qualitative and quantitative data to answer my research questions.

I selected a mixed-methods design to capture the overall perceived relationship between leadership and the student's experience and go in-depth to get personal accounts of how leadership has played a role in a student's ability to complete a degree. The benefits of using qualitative and quantitative methods were that they provide different ways to answer the research questions and could lead to a sounder understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2014). See Table 1 for the use of each method concerning the research questions, participants, and data sources. The study outcomes support my assumption that students perceive that leadership plays some role in degree completion.

Quantitative Data Analysis Methods

I used the SSI institutional data set from spring 2020 since this was the most recent survey administered to students at the time of this study. I determined gap scores between student perceptions of different items they deem most and least effective. To analyze the survey results, I used descriptive statistics and looked at gap scores, which measure how important a priority is to a student and how satisfied they are with it. I used descriptive statistics to answer the first and second research questions to determine which priority factors were most and least

effective based on students' perceptions. For the third research question, I used descriptive statistics, including frequency tables and crosstabulations, to detect differences in the overall experience and if students thought their degree completion was a priority to the college while considering gender and race/ethnicity.

Qualitative Data Analysis Methods

In addition to the SSI institutional data set, I conducted virtual interviews with students that helped me further investigate student perceptions. The data collection for the virtual interview included me asking the students a series of open-ended questions. The number of participants in the face-to-face interviews ended up being four. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) advocated for small sample sizes for qualitative interview research based on my ability to create genuine working relationships with few participants. I aimed to conduct less than ten interviews; however, I only received requests from four total students. As part of the interview protocol, I recorded the Zoom meeting using the functions provided by Zoom, then transcribed the interviews. Before the meeting, I developed a standard protocol including the order of the questions so that each interview follows the same conduct and manner. I asked each student to turn off their camera before starting the recording, so I did not reveal their identity during the interview. All students signed a consent document allowing me to record them and collect the data. The interview protocol consisted of a demographic section and ten open-ended questions to assess their perceptions of leadership regarding degree completion based on the research literature. Each of the ten questions was open-ended so that the participants could elaborate on their answers.

I examined and transcribed the interviews for the qualitative research, then coded the themes that emerged and used this data to answer my research questions. I originally planned to

use qualitative data analysis software, NVivo®, to code the data; however, due to the low response rate, I was able to code the data manually. I reviewed all lines of the transcription and manually tagged codes for easy reference. From the data, I organized the content into different parts of the final report. Using the established themes and theory, I analyzed all the data, coordinated it, and ensured the accuracy of the materials in discussing the study results. As I analyzed the data collected from the interviews, a spectrum of themes from general to specific occurred. Subsequently, I then interpreted these themes and established new meanings. The participants had up to one hour for their interview, including time to review the information before getting started, answer questions, and a final debriefing after the formal questions.

Methods for Establishing Qualitative Research Trustworthiness and Fidelity to Interpreting and Representing Participant Voice and Perspectives

Qualitative data collection plays an essential role in this research design; establishing trustworthiness is an important consideration. I believe the interviews to have credibility because of the ability to deepen the understanding of the research questions by asking open-ended questions to a student privately. The one-on-one interviews focused on the student's perceptions of the institution they plan to get a degree in. I planned to interview 10 students with different perceptions; however, I could only secure four interviews. The structure of the research design followed that the participants could express their opinions without the influence or bias of the researcher (myself), as the questions are open-ended and not leading.

For this study, I viewed students' opinions on leadership as perceptions. Some students perceive leadership to have a role in their ability to complete a degree, while others do not. I attribute some of this variance to personal interpretation, which I expected. Individual perspectives will shape their reality, and each participant's reality may be different.

I acknowledge that the student population in this county of the institution is not generalizable to students in other counties within the state or nationally. Because of limitations of the students' perceptions of their experience with the selected community college district, they cannot be generalized to other students attending different community colleges. My intention for this study was to provide insight into perceptions of how leadership can affect degree completion for community college students, even if it is just within one district. Since this study is limited to one community college district, I believe there is an opportunity for further research within other colleges in the state and nationally.

Site Familiarity and the Researcher's Role in Data Analysis

In terms of data collection and analysis, I was mindful that participants chose to answer questions in a particular manner because of my affiliation with the college; however, I briefed them to understand that individual information would not be shared with college administrators or associated with their names. Students could submit the online survey anonymously, as I did not collect names or identify characteristics. I conducted the virtual interviews with the camera off, and their names were not attached to the files.

I had an assumption that leadership would play a role in a student's ability to be successful in completing a degree from a community college. While I made efforts to prevent personal values and biases from influencing the study's design, the lens from which the research questions find their basis is personal experiences with community college students. Lastly, the study's design provides latitude to explore the research questions from an inquisitive standpoint and opens the research to take direction based on subsequent findings.

Ethical Considerations

I collected data after obtaining full approval from Abilene Christian University's (ACU) IRB and the site of the study's IRB. This dissertation used human subjects for both distributions of surveys and interview data collection. I will maintain the confidentiality of all participants' identifying information and will not associate data from the interview with any participant's name or identifying qualities. During the interviews, I recorded and transcribed the session using a coding system and used a pseudonym not to reveal the participants' names or identify characteristics other than basic demographics (age, gender, grade level.). The study does not cause more than minimal risk to participants as it is based on their perceptions and does not require revealing any information about their identity to speak freely about the institution.

After receiving permission to conduct the study on the college campus, I secured permission to email potential participants by proxy, as the college did not give me direct access to the student's email addresses. Potential participants received informed consent, which made them aware of the minimal risk of participating in the study and provided them the opportunity for their participation. Students who opted to complete the survey had to consent to the terms via the Qualtrics survey. Students who participated in the virtual interview had to sign the informed consent agreement saying they agreed to the terms and were willing to participate. I informed potential participants that I would maintain their confidentiality if they chose to participate. Then, I collected data from the surveys and interviews. I will only share results as is appropriate for the dissertation and research publications and in a manner that protects the participants allowing for honest disclosure of information from all respondents.

Delimitations

This study aimed to answer select research questions within an established population. A delimitation of the study was that it only considers one community college district, with multiple campuses, in a southwestern state. The research questions were delimited to focus on college completion rates, not other aspects of student success, like retention in between semesters. Delimited objectives of the research study included perceived leadership qualities of administrators and staff on the college campus. The purpose of the study was to find correlations between these qualities and college completion. I limited the variables to analyze the research questions. The research questions only focus on perceived relationships between administrators and staff and students from the student's perspective. I limited the students who fit the criteria for inclusion into the virtual interview portion of the data collection by reviewing credit hours completed and only allowing students to participate if they had 45 credit hours, three-fourths of their degree, completed.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to understand student perceptions of the role of leadership on student degree completion in addition to understanding how their satisfaction with institutional priority factors could relate to degree completion. I used a convergent mixed-methods procedure to collect qualitative and quantitative data separately, then reviewed and compared the results. I used the SSI institutional data set to answer the first two research questions. Using the SSI institutional data set, I analyzed gap scores between students' expectations and actual student satisfaction. This survey was an appropriate form of data collection because it allowed me to establish perceptions of leadership, student satisfaction, and institutional priorities.

I also interviewed students virtually to ask open-ended questions about their perceptions of leadership on degree completion. These interviews supplement the survey results by providing qualitative data collection in the form of open-ended questions and responses. An interview is an appropriate form of data collection because it allowed me to ask in-depth questions to the students in an open-ended question format. Participating in the interviews allowed the students to answer thoroughly and without restriction. I allowed students to volunteer to participate in a virtual interview after completing the survey, and four students signed up. The purpose of conducting a mixed-methods study was to collect measurable quantitative data based on agreement with statements about the student experience and compare these to anecdotal themes that present themselves from student interviews. I hoped this method would help carry out the purpose of the research, which was to determine how leadership affects degree completion.

With the culminating results from the SSI institutional data set and the open-ended interview questions about student's perceptions of degree completion (and what barriers may hinder their ability to be successful), I was able to be mindful to analyze patterns and look for differences based on gender and race/ethnicity. It is essential to analyze how a student's perception of the ability to complete a degree and the support they feel in this effort, and then compare their gender and race/ethnicity to see any correlations between variables. By reviewing these trends, I looked for any differences based on gender and race/ethnicity in terms of a student's overall experience, and if they believed it was a priority to the college, they graduated. Not all students will have the same experience when it takes them to complete their degree, and the role of gender and race/ethnicity is essential to understanding perceived limitations from a student's perspective. When interviewing the students, I believed it was essential to meet the students where they were in terms of their views of the reasons that may increase or limit their

ability to be successful in a community college and understand the differences in experiences of White and non-White students. Using the theoretical frameworks that make up this study set the precedent that I expected the students' experiences with the same college and program to vary based on their unique way of understanding and to be able to make sense of the world around them.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions of satisfaction with institutional priorities and the role of leadership on their ability to complete a degree program. This study explored the relationship between overall student experience and satisfaction with regards to gender and race/ethnicity, as well as the role of leadership on students' perceived ability to finish a degree. This chapter reviews the results of the SSI, and a survey and one-on-one interviews with students. This chapter includes a section on participants, discussions of the findings, types of data sources, the answers to the research questions, and a summary.

Participants

This study used two different groups of participants from different data sets. Seven hundred fifty-three students participated in the SSI administered in the spring of 2020 by the college study site. The college emailed over 10,000 students a link to participate in the study, but only 753 completed the SSI before the college took it offline due to COVID-19 disruptions. The response rate was 6.9%, which the college considered enough to be generalizable to the study body with a 95% confidence of plus or minus 3.5%, as they needed at least 600 to ensure their responses could be generalizable to the whole study body. Of the participants, 62% were female, and 38% were male; 52% were between the ages of 19 and 24, although participants ranged from 18 and under to 45 and over. Forty-two percent of participants identified as Caucasian/White, with the second-highest category being Hispanic (18%) and third being Asian or Pacific Islander (15%).

The second part of this study included a survey questionnaire and invitation to participate in a one-on-one interview that the college emailed on my behalf. The CCSIIP online survey questionnaire was developed for this study and consisted of two parts: The *Survey Questions* and

the *Interview Questions*. A college official sent the recruitment email for the CCSIIP, and subsequent emails to 3,484 students who met the participation criteria. Of this group, 25 students (an approximate 0.7% response rate) completed the online questionnaire, and four completed a one-on-one virtual interview. I gave the students two months to complete the questionnaire and sign up to participate in the interview before taking the links offline. The college sent the maximum allowable number of emails on my behalf reminding students to participate in the survey and interview. In addition, I tried to recruit students on campus to participate. Internal factors, like not being able to recruit or have access to students to administer the survey and external factors, including the pandemic, resulted in a lower than expected response rate for my survey.

From the group of respondents from the questionnaires, 56% of participants were female, 40% were male, and 4% identified as non-binary ($n = 25$). Most students who participated were between 18 and 25 (56%), although 24% of students between the ages of 30–35 also participated. Sixty-four percent of participants identified as Caucasian/White, another 20% were Hispanic, 12% were African American, and no students identified as Asian/Pacific Islander participated.

I interviewed four participants (two male, two female) who completed both the online survey and the virtual interview. Seventy-five percent were Caucasian/White, and 25% were Hispanic. Seventy-five percent were aged 18 to 25, and 25% were 26 to 29 years old. I did not include students under the age of 18 for this study.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of participants by gender. In this study, students were selected from three gender categories: male, female, and nonbinary/third gender.

Table 2*Gender Frequency Table*

Gender	<i>f</i>	%
Male	10	40.0
Female	14	56.0
Nonbinary/Third Gender	1	4.0
Total	25	100.0

To clarify the demographics of participants for the survey in this study, I included Table 2, which shows the frequency by gender, and Table 3, which shows the breakdown of participants by race/ethnicity. Students who participated in this study identified as African American, Caucasian/White, Hispanic and other.

Table 3*Race/Ethnicity Frequency Table*

Race/Ethnicity	<i>f</i>	%
African American	3	12.0
Caucasian White	16	64.0
Hispanic	5	20.0
Other	1	4.0
Total	25	100.0

Tables 2 and 3 provide the participants' gender and race/ethnicity. When analyzing the responses for research question three, I considered these variables to see differences in how students perceived their overall experience at the institution and if they believed it was a priority to the college where they finished their degree. Additionally, Table 4 shows the amount of time the participants in the survey have spent taking classes at the community college.

Table 4*Semesters Completed Frequency Table*

Semesters completed	<i>f</i>	%
Two Semesters	1	4.0
Three Semesters	5	20.0
Four Semesters	6	24.0
Five or more Semesters	13	52.0
Total	25	100.0

Table 4 shows that 52% of participants have spent five or more semesters at the community college. A typical year is two semesters, fall and spring, and a student can complete most associate (two-year) degrees in four semesters. Some students who only completed two or three semesters at the college may have transferred in credits or taken college classes during a dual credit program in high school. Seventy-six percent of students have completed four or five semesters at the community college.

Discussion

This study aimed to determine if students perceived the leadership and priorities of the college, along with satisfaction, to help them in completing their degree program. To examine the components of this study, I formed five research questions to explore several different aspects of the students' experience. The research questions addressed the following areas: (a) rating effectiveness of institutional priority factors, (b) impact of gender and race/ethnicity on students' overall experience, (c) their perceptions of how the college prioritizes degree completion, (d) the impacts of students' college experiences, and (e) and how the college supports degree completion.

To address the research questions, I used three sources of data: (a) the SSI institutional data set, (b) Community College Student Integration Protocol: Survey Questions, and (c) Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol: Interview Questions. By triangulating these different data sources, I was able to look for overarching themes in the students' experiences and perceptions to understand how they navigate the process of college completion. I looked at the extent to which they believe it is due to internal or external factors. The following sections discuss the mixed methods data used to examine factors affecting student degree completion.

Qualitative Findings

In this study, I identified the following themes: (a) connection and support; (b) autonomy and self-motivation; (c) barriers to success; (d) role of college staff, faculty, and administrators; (e) the indirect role of leadership and student support services; and (f) leadership and student support services as unimportant in degree completion. These themes emerged from the CCSIIP: Interview Questions which I administered as a virtual interview with students. The first theme, connection, and support, was based on student experiences while completing their degree. When I asked students what primary factors led to them completing their degree, most students agreed that support from their family, professors, and counselors were among the most substantial reasons they were still in college and close to graduation. Connection to the college, through involvement in clubs, groups, and organizations, or having a strong rapport with a college advisor or counselor was also a common theme that emerged.

Additionally, the students in the study also felt strongly that autonomy and self-motivation were some of the leading reasons why they were able to complete their degrees. Some students felt that their hard work alone had gotten them this far and that to continue to help

other students be successful, they should learn to rely only on themselves. Some participants felt that leadership did not play a role in their ability to be successful at all. Furthermore, some participants felt that student support services were not a part of their success and instead found college to be a self-directed process.

I identified many barriers to student success that aligned with Tinto's (2012b) theory of student departure; these emerged as a theme in the one-on-one interviews. These barriers included finances (financial aid and scholarships), class time offerings, and professor attitudes. Any of these factors could be the difference between a student completing their degree or dropping out, and researchers have found connections between access to more significant amounts of financial aid correlating to higher student retention rates (Tinto, 2012b). Two of the four students were adamant that access to financial aid was the only reason they could continue college, and one faced having to choose between working and taking classes when the college offered few class times.

After I analyzed the transcriptions and coded the interviews, additional themes emerged: the role of college personnel, leadership, and student support services. Two students thought these roles had no impact, one thought they had a significant impact, and one thought these roles had an indirect impact on their experience completing their degree. Students reflected on the first two themes of connection and support, or autonomy and self-motivation when determining if they believed any of these roles at the college impacted their ability to complete their degree.

I interviewed four students currently enrolled at the community college for the spring 2021 semester. Two were male, and two were female ($n = 4$). Seventy-five percent are Caucasian/White, and 25% are Hispanic. Seventy-five percent are aged 18 to 25, and 25% are 26 to 29. Participant 1 was a 26-year-old Caucasian/White woman from a long lineage of college-

educated family members. Participant 2 was a 20-year-old Caucasian/White man with a robust support system at home. Participant 3 was a 21-year-old Caucasian/White man, first-generation college student who does not have support at home. Participant 4 was a 19-year-old Hispanic woman who was also a first-generation college student.

Connection and Support

The first theme I identified after coding the qualitative interviews was the importance of connection and support. I asked students to identify factors they thought impacted their ability to complete their degree. Their answers included family, connection to the college, motivation, and self-motivation. Interview participants noted two suggestions for future student success: compassion and empathy from the college leaders and more support from student services.

Participant 1 is a 26-year-old woman who comes from a multigenerational college family that places a priority on higher education. She stated that it was her family who had the most significant impact on her ability to complete a degree:

My family has been supportive but also my career goals. So that has inspired me to further my education... my family is highly educated as well, so that helped me a lot. But I don't think that I would have done that, if I didn't see them being educated.

While this student had her family to look up to for guidance in the college process, Participant 3, a first-generation college student and had a very different experience. Participant 3, a 21-year-old man, is not only the first person in his family to go to college, but one of the few to complete high school. This student's parents had him when they were 16 years old, which led them to drop out of high school junior year. For him, there were more practical reasons that helped him with degree completion, such as getting financial aid to help with tuition, books, and living expenses. For the others, the experiences that most impacted their degree completion were a combination

of support and aid. When asked what experiences most impact their ability to complete a degree, Participant 3 said:

Having people by my side. Such as like the financial aid office and the advising office.

And just seems like they directly want to help me. And I feel like that yeah, I mean pretty much ... those have been the biggest impacts.

Without having anyone in his family to support him through the college process, Participant 3 relied heavily on resources at the college, such as advising and financial aid. Participant 3 also noted that no one in his family really values higher education, and he often feels pressure to drop out and start working like everyone else in his family. After interviewing the students and listening to their experiences, I found that they all relied on someone, whether it was family, someone at the college, or in some cases themselves, for support.

Autonomy and Self-Motivation

The second theme to emerge is one of autonomy and self-motivation. While the students contributed some of their success to others (i.e., family, staff at the college) in the first theme, there was also a strong development of self-motivation, and depending only on oneself that developed. Participant 1 said one of the experiences that helped her to complete her degree the most was moving to an online class format during the pandemic because this allowed her the time to figure it out on her own:

the fact that everything went online. I was able to... Because I wasn't working during that time, so I was able to kind of learn ... how to study, and I was able to figure out basically how college worked... because I, I feel like a lot of my college experiences hasn't...

nobody's told me what to do, or how to do it. You know, and so I've kind of felt like lost

in the whole way that college works ... but it's it's been a kind of an experience that I've figured out on my own.

Participant 2, a 20-year-old man, started taking classes at the community college due to a scholarship he received right after graduation. He had a strong support system at home and has joined many on-campus clubs and activities, even taking leadership positions in some of them. He was self-described as very involved in student engagement and aware of things going on within the college system. He was particularly impressed with how the college responded to the pandemic and felt they did a good job shifting to remote learning. He planned to transfer to a liberal arts college in New Jersey to pursue his goal of becoming a philosophy professor. Participant 2 said that he had to rely on his self-motivation often to get through his classes.

Participant 4, a 19-year-old woman, graduated high school in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 4 participated in the dual credit program at her high school, so she was familiar with the rigor of college-level coursework by the time she graduated. She was at the top of her class in high school and considered herself to be high achieving. She faced immense challenges when she started to apply to colleges her senior year because she was undocumented and unable to get federal financial aid. She applied to some out-of-state colleges, but due to financial barriers and despite being an extremely competitive college applicant, she continued to take classes at the community college so that she could work and pay for them herself before having to transfer to the university.

Participant 4 thought that a way to help struggling students complete their degree would be to teach them to be more self-sufficient, such as being able to read their degree plan and figure out their own class sequence, "A lot of [students] rely on advisors, and ... the advisors

don't really know what that personal students' concerns are, but if we teach the students instead, they would be able to succeed, a lot more.”

Barriers to Success

A third theme highlighted the common factors that students stated most negatively impacted their ability to complete their degree. These common factors are also called barriers to student success, per Tinto's theory of student departure. For Participant 3, access to financial aid was the single most crucial aspect of his enrollment experience at the college. Without financial aid, this student was confident they would not be at college. Another aspect that could have prevented degree completion was access to classes at certain times. For Participant 4, the further she got along in her degree program, the fewer courses were offered, which impacted her ability to work:

It's so hard because I'll have like one class maybe at 8 a.m. and then the next class doesn't have availability until maybe like 8 p.m. or 7 p.m., and it's like I have that big gap and... I would be in school all day because we are all spread out and I just couldn't work. [The college] doesn't do a very good job, about scholarship communication at all.

Another student stated the professors he had taken were not as invested in completing his degree, and more support would have been helpful. When asked what Participant 3 would change to help him complete his degree, he said:

Probably just be better professors. Professors who want to be there and make a difference, like the rest of the staff... [it] just seemed like I've gotten so much help from everybody else, but the professors are the one thing I think that really needs to you know, improve in order for other students to improve.

The barriers a student faces while completing a degree program are usually personal, but I discovered many students had similar concerns when it came to financial aid, scholarships, and support from instructors.

Role of College Staff, Faculty, and Administrators

In the CCSIIP, I included three different questions regarding the roles of the three primary groups of higher education employees: staff, faculty, and administrators. The participant had to respond to how each group (i.e., instructors, staff, and administrators) may have played a role in completing their degree. Two participants stated that they felt that college staff played a considerable role, while Participant 1 said they had very inspiring instructors, and Participant 2 mirrored these feelings, saying that his instructors helped him develop *free thinking* and select a transfer university.

Participant 3 attributed his still being in school to the advisor at the college who assisted him:

I've gotten a lot of help from a counselor that helped me progress in my degree and progress in school and really is the only reason why even have stayed in school.

Otherwise, I probably would have done something else. Which I'm happy about, because I think that this is the better route.

He further suggested that college administrations have a considerable role in supporting his ability to complete his degree. Participants 1 and 2 admitted that they did not use student services very often, but when they did, they found it helpful and therefore contributed some amount to their success. Participant 1 said that some of her instructors were very inspiring and played a large role in staying focused in her classes

Indirect Role of Leadership and Student Support Services

A theme that emerged from the student interviews was the indirect role of leadership and the indirect role support services played in their ability to complete their degree. Participant 2, conversely, stated that while he did not use many student support services, he agreed that the leadership of the college indirectly impacted his ability to complete a degree:

Indirectly, I mean ... without them, there would be no opportunity if there wasn't a President there'd be no college... I would definitely say they've impacted me in the way of just the initiatives that they've... allowed and ...allows students to shape the culture, which I think they've done, you know I think they've kind of taken a hands-off approach, which I appreciate a lot more.

Participant 1 agreed that she did not think there was a direct role that leadership placed in her ability to complete a degree. The indirect theme acknowledges the presence of leadership in the decision-making of school policies and completion agendas, but the students did not perceive this role to have any impact on their personal completion.

Leadership and Student Support Services as Unimportant in Degree Completion

In contrast, some students interviewed perceived college leadership and student support services to not play a role in completing their degree. Participant 1 had experiences where the student support services were not helpful to her and made her feel less inclined to ask for help in the future:

Unfortunately, I wouldn't say anyone has helped me through admin [leadership]. A lot of that I just kind of scheduled on my own, and I actually did the research on my own, and I figured everything out on my own because I found that actually weren't very helpful.

Participant 4 had similar feelings about student support services not playing a role in her degree completion, "...I never go to any advisors and honestly it works out best because though I've met with two and the only times I go to them, they are not helpful and everyone else, says the same thing." Participant 4 stated that college staff did not have any role in her ability to complete her degree and did not think leadership had any impact either.

Participant 1 believed the institutional leadership did not impact her ability to complete her degree, but instead, it was based on the individual, their work ethic, and their personal goals. Overall, she stated that neither the student services nor the leadership team had ever been directly helpful to her.

While Participant 4 was set in her thinking that the leadership and support services have no direct impact on her that she can see, however, she did suggest that the instructors had a role in her degree completion because she relied on them to offer the courses she needed to graduate at certain times to fit her schedule.

Quantitative Results

In addition to the themes that emerged through the qualitative interviews, I also analyzed results from the SSI institutional data set and the CCSIIP: Survey Questions sent to students. The first facet of the student experience I analyzed was students' satisfaction with institutional priority factors at the college. Based on results from the SSI institutional data set, I determined that students are satisfied with and put importance on feeling a sense of belonging on the campus and having access to support and academic services. There are also institutional priority factors that students rank as very important to them but are not as satisfied with, including advising, safety, and concern for the individual.

The SSI institutional data set results suggest that the students' value having access to support and academic services, including academic advising and counseling professionals that are knowledgeable and support the student. This area ended up being one of the areas students perceived to be the least effective and one of the most important. In the CCSIIP survey, 68% of respondents suggested seeking out student support services sometimes, frequently, or always. While these are critical services a college can provide to its students, the SSI suggests there is still room for improvement to meet a higher satisfaction. The SSI institutional data set showed that students are satisfied with the offered academic services, including tutoring, library services, and computer labs.

To further examine students' perceptions, I administered a survey asking them about their overall experience with the institution and if they felt that completing their degree was a priority to the college. I looked at the overall experience and priority of the college in terms of students' gender, race/ethnicity. Overall, 60% of participants rated their experience as good, including both males and females. Additionally, 36% of students, both male, and female felt that the college places a great deal of priority on them completing a college degree.

Types of Data Sources

This study used a combination of three different data sources to complete a mixed-methods study on student perceptions on their ability to complete their degree program. The three data sources are: (a) the Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol (CCSIIP), (b) the survey and interview, and (c) the SSI Scores. I administered The Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol to students as two voluntary activities, a survey and an interview. I emailed students the link to complete the CCSIIP as a survey and as a virtual interview. Students had the option to complete the survey only or also voluntarily participate in

an interview. The CCSIIP Interview questions allowed students to share their experiences in a confidential, open-ended question environment.

Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol: Survey Questions

The Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol is an anonymous online survey and an optional virtual interview with open-ended questions. I created an online survey through Qualtrics that students could access via mobile device or computer. The questions ranged from demographic questions to Likert scale questions about their experiences as a student. This study used responses from this survey to determine students' overall experience with the college, if they believe that their degree completion is a priority to the college, and how often they seek out services from the college.

To understand the responses from the survey, I used SPSS software and, using descriptive statistics, created frequency tables and crosstabulation. In most cases, I was interested in seeing trends in responses to the survey and if any of the independent variables, such as gender and race/ethnicity, impacted their experience overall. I used this data to explore my research question 3 further and look for correlations between participant responses and experiences.

Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol: Interview Questions

The second part of the CCSIIP included ten open-ended interview questions. I allowed students who completed the survey questions to voluntarily sign up to complete the virtual interview in addition to the online survey. I used the interview questions to explore the participants' experiences and perceptions of factors that impact their ability to complete their degrees. The interview allowed students to share the key factors that helped them persist to their final semester of college, and I was able to gather themes as a result of their responses. I used

these responses to answer the fourth and fifth research questions with the survey responses. I transcribed and coded all virtual interviews to look for emerging themes.

Student Satisfaction Inventory Scores

This study used scores from the SSI institutional data set to determine students' perceived satisfaction with institutional priorities at the college. To understand the gap scores, I determined what areas students found most important and deemed most satisfied with overall. The value a student gives a scale item (institutional priority) assesses the importance of a particular priority, while the satisfaction score suggests if the college meets the expectation. This information is valuable to an institution of higher education because it shows what areas their students find to be of top priority and confirms areas where the college is or is not meeting their expectations. Table 5 shows all scales (institutional priorities) and the numerical values of importance, satisfaction, and the gap between them. The participants ranked the scales from most to least important and ranked them by the most to least satisfied.

Table 5 includes a ranking of each of the institutional priorities by importance. The most important is safety and security (6.44), followed by academic services (6.43) and registration effectiveness (6.43). Conversely, the top-ranked priority by satisfaction is academic services (6.08), followed by registration effectiveness (5.93), and student centeredness (5.84). Students ranked each institutional priority differently in terms of importance and satisfaction.

Table 5*Scores for Importance, Satisfaction, and Gap*

Scale	Importance	Importance rank	Satisfaction /SD	Satisfaction rank	Gap score
Student Centeredness	6.27	10 th	5.84 /1.21	3 rd	0.43
Instructional Effectiveness	6.43	4 th	5.82 /1.18	5 th	0.61
Campus Support Services	6.15	11 th	5.72 /1.33	9 th	0.43
Safety and Security	6.44	1 st	5.77 /1.13	7 th	0.67
Academic Advising/Counseling	6.41	5 th	5.66 /1.32	11 th	0.75
Admissions and Financial Aid	6.40	6 th	5.76 /1.31	8 th	0.64
Academic Services	6.43	2 nd	6.08 /1.10	1 st	0.35
Registration Effectiveness	6.43	3 rd	5.93 /1.04	2 nd	0.50
Service Excellence	6.29	8 th	5.83/ 1.09	4 th	0.46
Concern for the Individual	6.34	7 th	5.69 /1.28	10 th	0.65
Campus Climate	6.29	9 th	5.82 /1.10	6 th	0.47

The satisfaction score subtracted from the importance score equals the gap score. If the difference between the two scores is relatively low or negligible, then one can conclude that the institution is meeting the student's expectations in that area, as they are both satisfied with it and deem it important to them. Conversely, if the gap is a larger number, then these are areas that the college has not met a student's expectation of that factor.

Discussion of Research Question Outcomes

This mixed-methods study addressed five research questions. The first three questions were quantitative, while the fourth and fifth were qualitative. I designed each research question to explore a different part of the students' experience, including their satisfaction with institutional priorities, their overall experience, if they felt that the college valued their eventual completion, and the factors that contributed to their success. In this context, *success* is defined as completing an associate degree. This section includes the outcomes of the research questions and the overall findings related to each question.

RQ1 Outcomes

RQ1 examined what institutional priority factors, measured by scale items, students at a community college district in North Texas perceived as most important and met or exceeded their expectations. To determine the college's most effective areas, I examined the gap score between importance and satisfaction of the scale items. As noted, the smaller the gap score, the better the institution is doing to meet a student's expectations in a specific area. Subsequently, these areas were categories the students both deemed important and were satisfied with overall. The institutional priority factors with the lowest gap scores included academic services (0.35), campus support services (0.43), and student centeredness (0.43).

Table 6 shows the importance, satisfaction, and gap score for these institutional priorities. Some of the areas included in academic services include adequate study areas, library resources, computer labs, and tutoring services. Campus support services included access to childcare facilities, veterans' programs, career services, and new student orientation. Student centeredness measured students feeling a sense of belonging, concern for the individuals, whether

administrators are approachable, and students feeling welcome on the campus (Noel Levitz, 2018).

Table 6

Three Smallest Gap Scores

Scale	Importance	Satisfaction (SD)	Gap score
Student Centeredness	6.27	5.84 (1.21)	0.43
Campus Support Services	6.15	5.72 (1.33)	0.43
Academic Services	6.43	6.08 (1.10)	0.35

Because of the low gap score, I analyzed these areas and assumed that students perceive these areas of the college to be most effective. In all three of these institutional priority factors, the difference between importance and satisfaction is relatively low. However, the top three most important scales were safety and security, academic services, and registration effectiveness. Student centeredness, while a low gap scale, is ranked 10 out of 11 for importance to students, meaning that while students feel that the college met their expectations and is exceedingly effective in this area, it is not very important to them. Academic services had the lowest gap score and ranked 2 out of 11 for importance, meaning it is one of the most important areas for students, and the college exceeded their expectations. This area is one of the college's strengths in terms of being highly important to students and having a high satisfaction rank. Campus support services ranked 11 out of 11 for importance, meaning it is the most negligible essential institutional priority factor of the options. Still, because of its low gap score, I determined that the college is meeting the students' expectations in this area even if it is less important to them.

RQ2 Outcomes

RQ2 aimed to determine what institutional priority factors, measured by scale items, students at a community college district in North Texas perceived as important but not met or exceeded their expectations. To determine the areas in which the college is least effective, I looked at the gap score between importance and satisfaction of the scale items, this time concerned with the most significant gap. The larger the gap score, the less the college meets the student's expectations as measured by a large dissidence between importance and satisfaction. The three most significant gap scores by scale in Table 7 are academic advising/counseling (0.75), safety and security (0.67), and concern for the individual (0.65).

Table 7

Three Largest Gap Scores

Scale	Importance	Satisfaction (SD)	Gap score
Academic Advising/Counseling	6.41	5.66 (1.32)	0.75
Safety and Security	6.44	5.77 (1.13)	0.67
Concern for the Individual	6.34	5.69 (1.28)	0.65

Based on the relatively large gap score for these scale items, I determined that the college did not meet student expectations in these areas. *Academic Advising/Counseling* includes metrics such as approachability of academic advisors and getting help from them about program requirements, transferability, and goal setting. This scale also measures if students think advisors and counselors are concerned about their success as individuals. *Safety and Security* include adequate parking spaces and that lots are well-lit and security staff that is helpful and respond

quickly to emergencies. Concern for the individual measures if the student feels that the college, faculty members, advisors, and counselors care about and show concern (Noel Levitz, 2018).

These three areas have the highest gap score; therefore, I assumed that students perceive these areas of the college to be least effective overall. In all three of these institutional priority factors, the difference between the importance and satisfaction is relatively high. However, the top least important scales are campus support services (11 of 11), student centeredness (10 of 11), and campus climate (9 of 11), none of which has a high gap score. Academic advising/counseling has a high gap score and ranked 5 out of 11 for importance to students, meaning that while students feel that the college did not meet their expectations and is not particularly effective in this area, it is of average importance to them. However, this area ranked 11 of 11 for satisfaction, meaning students are not satisfied with the scale items included in this institutional priority factor. Safety and security has a high gap score and ranked one out of 11 for importance, meaning it is one of the most important areas for students, and the college is not meeting their expectations. This area is one of the college's challenges as students rated it of high importance, but with a relatively low satisfaction rank. Students ranked concern for the individual 7 out of 11 for importance, meaning it is of relatively lower importance to students, and the satisfaction ranked 10 of 11, meaning this is an area students are neither satisfied with, nor feel are their expectations met.

RQ3 Outcomes

The third research question asks if there are differences in satisfaction of the overall experience and the perceived priority of the institution for a student to complete a degree based on gender and race/ethnicity at a community college district in North Texas. To address this

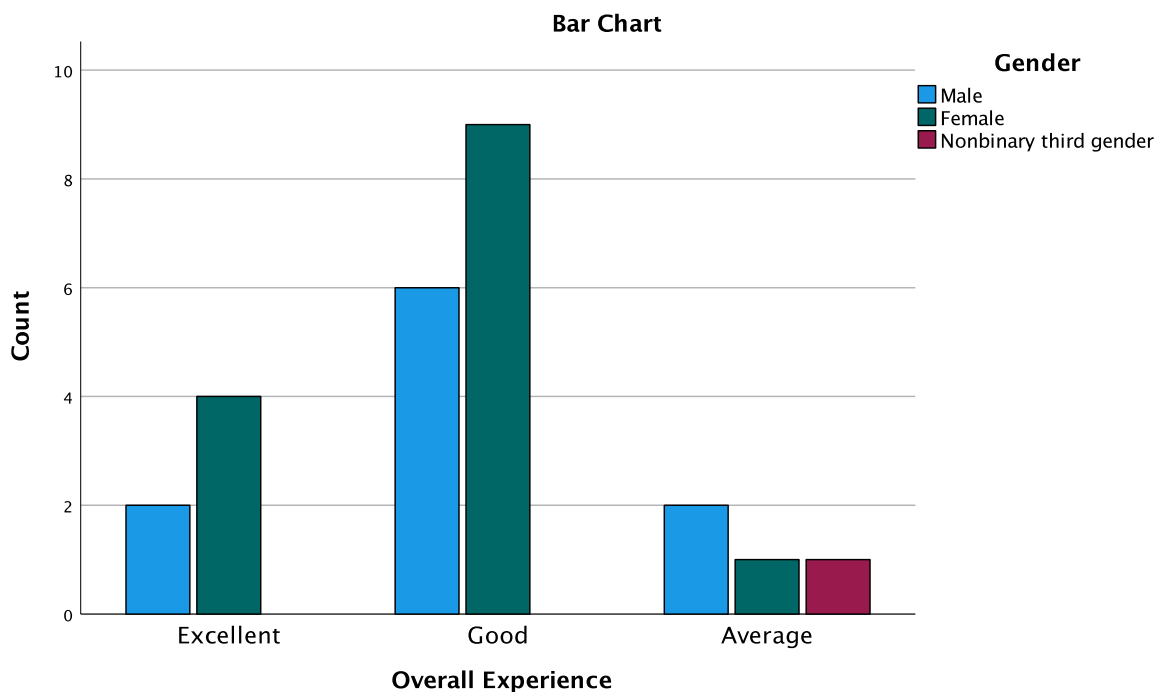
question, I used the results from the CCSIIP and analyzed them using frequency tables and crosstabs, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8

*Overall Experience * Gender Crosstabulation*

Overall Experience	Male	Female	Nonbinary/ third gender	Total
Excellent	2	4	0	6
% within gender	20%	28.6%	0.0%	24.0%
Good	6	9	0	15
% within gender	60%	64.3%	0.0%	60.0%
Average	2	1	1	4
% within gender	20.0%	7.1%	100.0%	16.0%
Total	10	14	1	25
% within gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

I asked students to rate their overall experience as a student at the institution they currently attend. I found that based on gender, 60% of male and 64.3% of female participants found their overall experience at the college to be good, while 20% of male and 28.6% of female participants rated it as excellent. Students' overall experience did not vary much based on gender for those who had an excellent or good rating. However, 20% of male participants said their overall experience at the college was average, compared to only 7.1% of female participants and 100% of the one participant who identified as a nonbinary third gender. In total, 60% of participants ranked their overall experience as good. I found slight differences in perceptions of overall experience related to gender, but the findings were not significant. Figure 3 shows trends in overall experience based on three gender categories: male, female, and nonbinary/third gender.

Figure 3*Students' Overall Experience at the College by Gender*

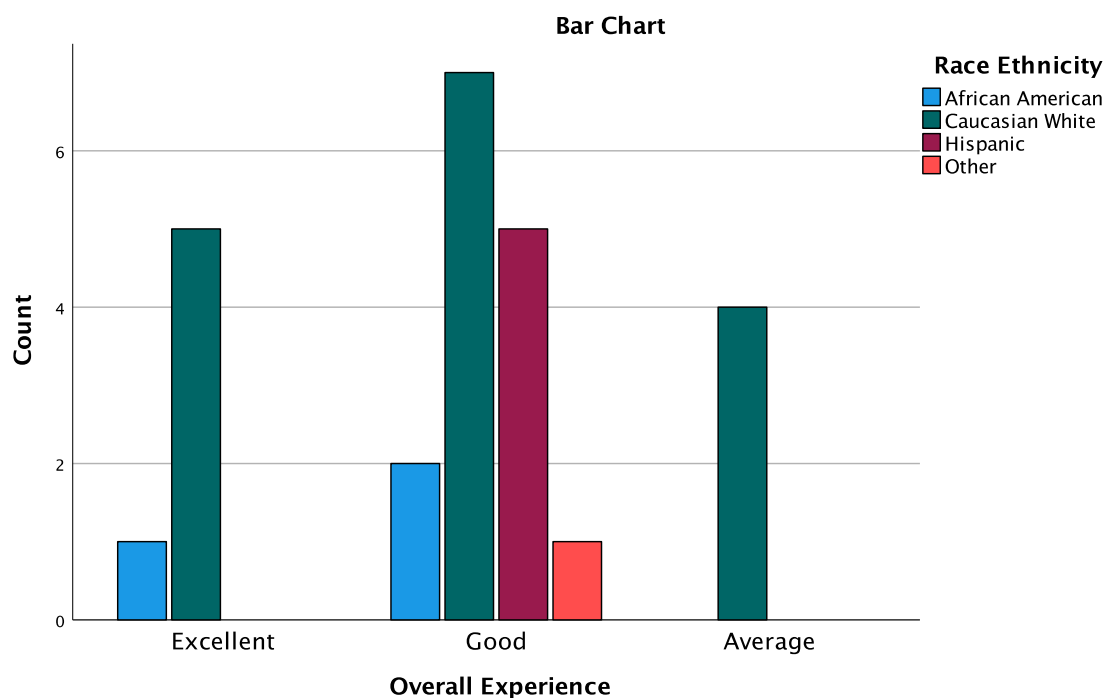
Note. Number of men = 10, number of women = 14, nonbinary/third gender = 1, $N = 25$.

In addition to gender, I completed a crosstabulation of overall experience with race/ethnicity and had participants from the following groups: African American, Caucasian/White, Hispanic and Other. As shown in Table 9, approximately 67% of African American students ranked their overall experience as good, followed by 43.8% of Caucasian students and 100% of Hispanic Students. The remaining 33% of African American students rated their overall experience as excellent, in addition to 31.3% of Caucasian students. One participant who identified as Other, an unspecified race/ethnicity, rated their experience as good, and in total, 60% of participants rated their experience as good overall.

Table 9*Overall Experience * Race/Ethnicity Crosstabulation*

Overall experience	African American	Caucasian/White	Hispanic	Other	Total
Excellent	1	5	0	0	6
% within gender	33.3%	31.3%	0.0%	0.0%	24.0%
Good	2	7	5	1	15
% within gender	66.7%	43.8%	100.0%	100.0%	60.0%
Average	0	4	0	0	4
% within gender	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.0%
Total	3	16	5	1	25
% within gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

From Table 9, I concluded that most students, 84% had an excellent or good experience, compared to the 16% who rated it as good. The result suggests that most students are satisfied with their overall experience at the institution. However, when I separated the categories by race/ethnicity, 100% of Hispanic rated the experience as good, while Caucasian/White students were split across all three metrics - excellent, good, and average. African American students were not in total agreement either, with some rating the experience as good and others as excellent. Figure 4 is a bar graph of the different levels of satisfaction of experience based on race. I found different trends in the overall experience regarding race/ethnicity, but the results were not statistically significant.

Figure 4*Students' Overall Experience by Race/Ethnicity*

Note. African American = 3, Caucasian White = 16, Hispanic = 5, Other = 1, $N = 25$.

The second consideration for this portion of the study is how much a student feels like it is a priority to the college that they complete a degree. Students answered how much of a priority they think it is to the college overall that they complete their degree. To determine differences in gender and race/ethnicity, I also used crosstabulation through descriptive statistics, as shown in Table 10. One hundred percent of African American students felt that it was a great deal of a priority to the college to complete their degree, along with 31.3% of Caucasian and 20% of Hispanic students. In total, 36% of students thought that the priority to the college to complete their degree was of the highest importance. Caucasian students seemed to be the most split across the scale from high to low with equal amounts, 31.3% believing that the priority was a great and moderate amount to the college.

Table 10*Priority to College to Complete * Race/Ethnicity Crosstabulation*

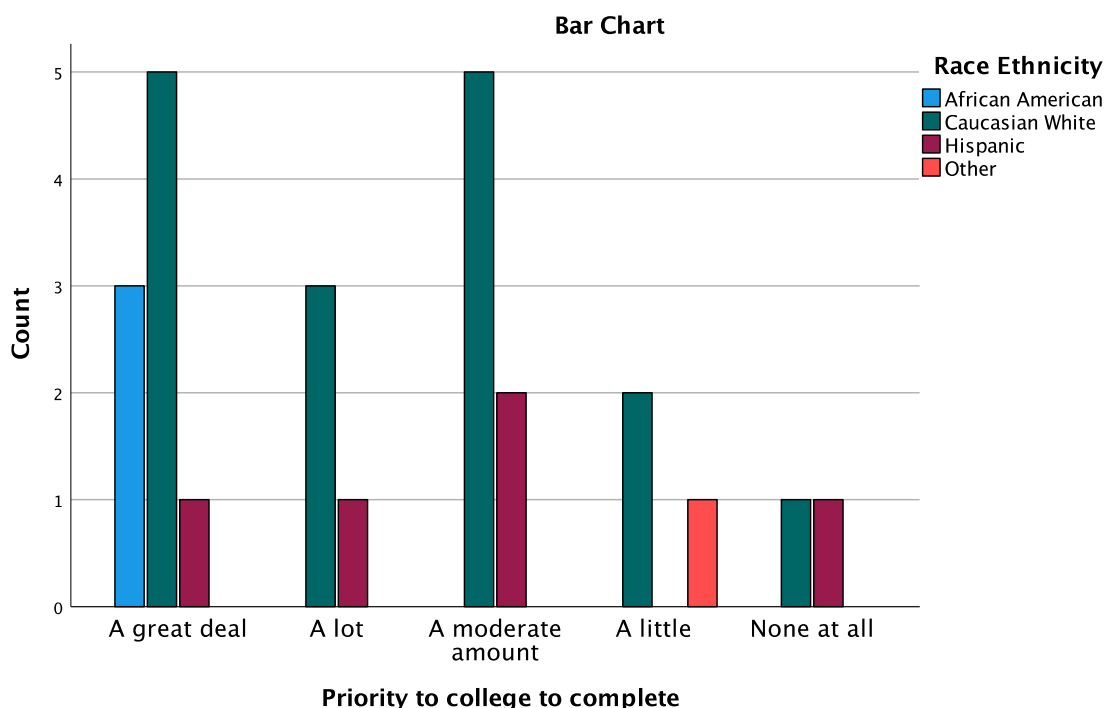
Priority to the college	African American	Caucasian/White	Hispanic	Other	Total
A great deal	3	5	1	0	9
% within gender	100.0%	31.3%	20.0%	0.0%	36.0%
A lot	0	3	1	0	4
% within gender	0.0%	18.8%	20.0%	0.0%	16.10%
A moderate amount	0	5	2	0	7
% within gender	0.0%	31.3%	40.0%	0.0%	28.0%
A little	0	2	0	1	3
% within gender	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	100.0%	12.0%
None at all	0	1	1	0	2
% within gender	0.0%	6.3%	20.0%	0.0%	8.0%
Total	3	16	5	1	25
% within gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 5 provides the level of students' priority to the college to complete their degree, broken down by race/ethnicity. Based on participant responses, it appears that Caucasian White students and Hispanic students were most conflicted in their opinions, as they differed across believing that a great deal of a priority, a lot of a priority, a moderate amount of a priority, and not a priority at all. As colleges typically put great efforts into completion and graduation,

unexpectedly, some students perceived it was not a priority to the college that they complete a degree.

Figure 5

Students' Perception of Priority to Complete by Race/Ethnicity



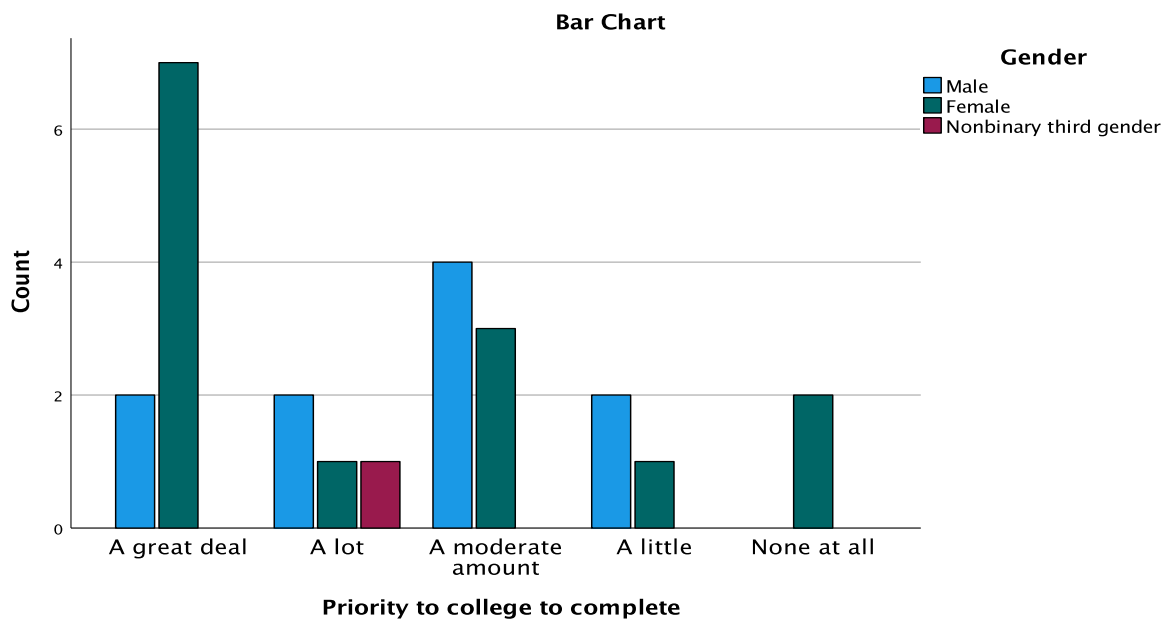
Note. African American = 3, Caucasian White = 16, Hispanic = 5, Other = 1, $N= 25$.

Additionally, I looked at the differences in perceived priority to the college where a student finishes a degree based on their gender, as shown in Table 11. Forty percent of male students felt that it was only a moderate amount of a priority to the college that they complete, while the remaining 60% was equally split into 20% believing it was a great deal of a priority, 20% believing it is a lot of a priority, and 20% believe it is a little bit of a priority. Conversely, 50% of female participants believed that the priority to the college that they finish their degree has a great deal of importance, 21.4% believed it is a moderate amount, while 14.3% believed it is not a priority at all.

Table 11*Priority to College to Complete * Gender Crosstabulation*

Priority to the college to complete	Male	Female	Nonbinary/ third gender	Total
A great deal	2	7	0	9
% within gender	20%	50.0%	0.0%	36.0%
A lot	2	1	1	4
% within gender	20%	7.1%	100.0%	16.0%
A moderate amount	4	3	0	7
% within gender	40.0%	21.4%	0.0%	28.0%
A little	2	1	0	3
% within gender	20.0%	7.1%	0.0%	12.0%
None at all	0	2	0	2
% within gender	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	8.0%
Total	10	14	1	25
% within gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In Figure 6, the bar chart shows how responses across gender were not unified for male or female students. Half of the female participants indicated that they felt it was a great deal of importance to the college that they complete their degree, while the other half split across believing that it was either a lot, a moderate amount, a little amount, or not at all. The responses from male students split across four levels of priority, from a great deal to a little, but no male students felt that it was not a priority to the college that they complete their degree.

Figure 6*Priority to College to Complete by Gender*

Note. Number of men = 10, women = 14, nonbinary third gender = 1, $N = 25$.

The chart and table show little agreement in students' perceptions of if it is a priority to the college that they complete their degree. It is worth noting that more women than men felt that it was a little bit of a priority, or not at all.

RQ4 Outcomes

The fourth research question considers what aspects of a student's enrollment and matriculation experiences impact community college degree completion. To answer this question, I looked to answers from the qualitative data collection, including a survey of questions and one-on-one interview of open-ended questions. Twenty-five students completed an anonymous online questionnaire in which they were asked to rate their overall experience as a student at the institution. Of the responses, 60% rated their overall experience as good, 25% thought it was excellent, and 15% ranked it average. In addition to the survey, I completed four

one-on-one interviews with students to allow them to answer open-ended questions about their experience completing their degree. I identified themes that correspond with the research question of different aspects of students' enrollment impacting their ability to complete a degree.

RQ5 Outcomes

I looked at responses to the online survey and virtual interviews to determine how students perceive college leadership and student support services to impact their degree completion. The online questionnaire results suggest that 52% of students think it is a great deal or a lot of a priority overall to the college that they complete their degree, with 28% thinking it is only a moderate amount of a priority.

The responses also referenced faculty as well. I discuss the RQ 5 findings for the three primary higher education employees in this section: faculty, staff, and administrators. When considering if they thought it was a priority to their instructors, only 48% perceived it to be a great deal or a lot of a priority, compared to the 36% who thought it was a moderate amount. Even though a significant number of students admitted to not using student support services very frequently, and only perceiving their degree to be a moderate amount of a priority to faculty and staff, 64% said they always or frequently felt supported by the faculty, staff, and administrators at the college.

To understand how students perceive college faculty, staff, and administrators to impact their ability to complete a degree, I asked them the following questions during the one-on-one interview to gain additional insight. What role do you think instructors, staff, and administrators have on your ability to complete your degree? I asked students about these roles in three different questions to allow them to reflect on each individual group. I also asked students the following

question. Do you think the leadership of the college and student support services impact your ability to complete your degree? From these questions, three concepts emerged:

- Some students these roles have a significant impact.
- Other students think these roles do not have an impact at all.
- Some students perceive these roles to have an indirect impact.

Approximately 50% of students surveyed agreed that it is a priority for the college to complete their degree. I asked students during the interview what role they believed the college played on their ability to complete their degree in three categories: instructors, staff, and college administrators. Similar to the survey results, students from the interviews were diverse perspectives on whether they believed any college personnel impacted their ability to complete a degree.

Most students agreed that their instructors played a significant role because they inspired them, helped them transfer, and offered the courses needed for graduation. Students were less sure that college staff had an impact on their ability to complete a degree, and 50% of interview participants said they had no impact whatsoever, while one student said they did not often use these services, and the remaining student believed college staff to have a significant role. The participants also viewed college administrators as having a varied role.

Student Support Services. I used both of these data sets to determine how much of a priority students think their success is to the college and how often they seek support services. Of the participants, 68% admitted seeking student support services between sometimes, frequently, and always. The remaining 32% said that they rarely seek services like admissions, advising, and financial aid.

Summary

I answered five different research questions using three different data sources, including the SSI institutional data set, an online questionnaire, and one-on-one interviews. Through a culmination of these three different sources, I analyzed each set of data regarding the five research questions. The first research question set out to determine which institutional priority factors students felt to be the most important and met their expectations. I identified these areas from the SSI to be student centeredness, campus support services, and academic services. The second research question looked at the institutional priority factors students perceived to be important, but the college did not meet their expectations. These priority factors included academic advising/counseling, safety and security, and concern for the individual. I determined these factors by measuring gap scores between satisfaction and importance from the Noel Levitz SSI administered in the spring of 2020.

To answer the third research question, I looked to the online survey administered by the college on my behalf. The third research question is, are there differences in satisfaction of the overall experience and the perceived priority of the institution for a student to complete a degree based on gender and race/ethnicity. The fourth research question looked at what aspects of a student's enrollment and matriculation experiences most impacted degree completion. I analyzed data from the survey and the interview to determine which aspects most impacted students' experience completing their degrees. The key findings included many factors such as connection, support from family, friends, and the college, autonomy, and self-motivation. Additionally, students self-identified aspects that could keep them from completing their degree, like not receiving scholarships or financial aid.

Research question five looked at the overarching question of how students perceive college leadership and student support services to impact their degree completion. The surveys and the interviews suggested that many students were not reliant on student support services and only used them sometimes. The majority of students felt that it was a priority to the college overall that they completed their degree and frequently felt supported. During the one-on-one interviews' students shared varying levels of agreement that leadership and support services impacted their ability to complete a degree, with some saying it had a huge role, some saying it had no role, and some saying it only had an indirect role.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this study, I intended to view the problem of low rates of degree completion through students' perceptions of satisfaction with the hope of examining the role leadership plays on a student's ability to graduate with an associate degree. The purpose of this study was to understand the students' perceptions of satisfaction with institutional priorities and the role of leadership on their ability to complete a degree. I used mixed methods research to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the participants and then explored the phenomenon of low degree completion in community colleges. I collected survey results indicating student perceptions, analyzed results from the SSI, and coded results from open-ended questions from students through conducting one-on-one virtual interviews. Through my interview questions, I asked students to think about three groups of college staff: faculty, student support services staff, and administrators in positions of leadership. I guided students through each group, giving examples, such as someone who works for student support services could be an admissions advisor, whereas someone who works in leadership could be a director or a dean of the whole department.

Overall, results from this study capture the voices of students at a community college district in North Texas and give suggestions for ways areas within the institution could improve that could lead to higher degree completion from their unique perspectives. In this chapter, I will discuss my research findings in terms of past literature, explore the study's limitations, and make recommendations for both practical application and future research. Lastly, I will conclude with my final considerations and concluding thoughts.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature

The existing literature on student satisfaction suggests that high student satisfaction can impact persistence and retention, while low satisfaction can lead to attrition and dropouts (Bryant, 2006; Schreiner, 2009). In this study, I wanted to focus on areas students found most and least satisfied relative to importance. I found that students ranked campus support services, academic services, and student centeredness to be both important and satisfied areas. This information implies that students feel welcomed on the campus and that the college met their library, computer lab, and tutoring needs, and that they are satisfied with campus support and academic services. The most significant finding of this research question is that students rate student centeredness so highly, meaning they are both satisfied and the college is meeting their expectations of making them feel a sense of belonging and that the college is student-centered.

Conversely, the areas of academic advising/counseling, safety and security, and concern for the individual had a large gap between the importance and satisfaction with the priority. Since student satisfaction can impact persistence and retention, institutions need to pay attention to areas that need improvement and ensure they meet their needs. Key recommendations to improving students' satisfaction with the institution are to provide high-quality services, especially in the departments with the most student contact, such as advising, admissions, and financial aid (Eom & Ashill, 2016; Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015).

Students who completed the survey acknowledged that they did often seek advising/counseling services, but those in the interview said many times that these interactions were poor or unhelpful, leading to their independence in these matters. These student experiences provide valuable empirical data connecting leadership, satisfaction, and priorities to

students' practical experiences into practical matters, such as emphasizing specific departments within the college, like advising and counseling, so that services provided may be more helpful.

Findings from this study also point to the disconnect between priorities of leadership and perceptions of students. The literature states that action leaders can take to meet the needs of their students is to assess and predict the resources they may require (AACU, 2015b).

Additionally, leaders should have candid conversations within the college about ways to help support underserved students who may feel marginalized and be aware of cultural competencies (AACU, 2015b). These suggestions give actionable items higher education institutions can take right away to express their priorities and make them known to students.

Based on the student survey, only 36% of students felt that it was a great deal of a priority to the college they completed their degree. In the interviews, most students said that they did not think the leadership of the college and student support services impacted their ability to complete their degree. They believed their work ethic and goals led to degree completion. Persistence, retention, and graduation are a top priority for the college and the statewide 60x30TX initiative, so this tells me there is a disconnect between students' perceptions of leadership and the goals of leadership. The suggestions from the AACU (2015b) are to have an honest conversation within the college about ways to help these students, which could go a long way in terms of transparency and showing students their investment in student success for the long term. Some students perceive leadership to have no impact on their degree completion, while others perceive leadership to impact degree completion significantly. Additionally, some students perceive support services to have no impact on their degree completion, while others perceive it to have a significant impact. These results are significant because they suggest there is still a lot to be understood about the relationship between students and college leadership related

to degree completion. Because most students do not think it is a great deal of a priority to the college that they finish their degree, I strongly suggest the college alter their approach to be more student-centered in expressing this as a priority.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the theory of student departure and critical race theory. The theory of student departure provides a reference for reasons why students may drop out or not complete their degrees, as well as reasons that impact their likelihood of completion. This framework provides a way to understand factors students contribute to their ability to complete a college degree. Critical race theory in education provides a lens to understand how students process their experience in higher education. Researchers suggest that studies done at the community college level should use a CRT lens to understand student experiences as these institutions serve a large population of students of color and students from marginalized groups who face historically bleak outcomes in advancing their education (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016).

Tinto's modern theory of student departure provided a framework for understanding the importance of institutional action on student degree completion, retention, and graduation (Tinto, 2012a). I used this interactionist approach to understand students' perceptions of their interactions within the institution and with faculty and staff. Through the virtual interviews, I found that students have unique interactions with the college, which shaped their overall experience. Some of the students felt that because of a bad experience with staff members in advising and admissions, they were less likely to use these services in the future and did not think college staff had a role in their ability to complete a degree. Students' experiences will all be unique, and as Tinto suggests, every time the student interfaces with someone at the college,

they create an impression on them that will shape their overall perception. I found this theory to be accurate as many students remembered detailed interactions with someone at the college, and based on this one experience, decided that either the college staff was not helpful and they would do everything on their own, or they were helpful so they would seek them out again. Because each interaction with a student can help them get closer to, or further away from, completion, it is vital that institutions prioritize the front-facing student workers, who will have the most interactions with students, and that these interactions are thoughtful and helpful.

Through this study, I selected a critical race theory lens to understand the difference in student experience regarding race and explain educational disparities between White and non-White students (Zorn, 2018). I surveyed students about their overall experience at the college and completed a crosstabulation to look for trends in responses from participants by race/ethnicity. Approximately 67% of African American students ranked their overall experience as good, followed by 43.8% of Caucasian students and 100% of Hispanic Students. The remaining 33% of African American students rated their overall experience as excellent, in addition to 31.3% of Caucasian students. It is essential to appreciate that students will have different experiences based on their interactions and differences in gender, race, and Ethnicity. In terms of whether a student felt that it is a priority to the college that they complete their degree, 100% of African American students felt that it was a great deal of a priority to the college that they complete their degree, along with 31.3% of Caucasian and 20% of Hispanic students.

The institutional dynamics present at the college can impact different student demographics in diverse ways. Although students of color had a positive overall experience and felt that the college placed a priority on their degree completion, there could be different institutional dynamics that supported these perspectives, or they could be from the student's

background. Using the CRT lens, I appreciate that each student comes from a unique set of circumstances that influences their ability to understand and process their experiences. To understand the national context, it is important to understand that African American students are still less likely than Caucasian students to enroll in college after high school, and when they do, they are much more likely to attend a community college or less selective 4-year college than Caucasian students who tend to attend selective universities (Comeaux et al., 2020). Because this study only considers students at a community college, the experiences of non-White students are particularly important and should be of high importance to the intuition who will traditionally serve these students.

While it is not explicitly clear why African American and Hispanic students rated their overall experience at the college as excellent, it is possible that they come from backgrounds of persistence and a college-going culture as the college district is located in an affluent suburb of a major city. The site of this study also recently invested \$141 million into a new technical campus that will offer the first trade programs in the county, including associate degree programs in construction, welding, and automotive. To recruit students for these programs, they have conducted outreach to target Hispanic and Spanish-speaking parts of the community in addition to other outreach efforts to attract students for the programs. This could suggest that the community college prioritizes supporting a diverse student population and understands the needs of students extend beyond just academic transfer programs but also include technical trades.

Through the one-on-one interviews, I was able to somewhat understand how students' life experiences could impact their drive or stamina. It is possible that students who come from a background of having to exhibit autonomy and self-motivation versus feelings of entitlement may be more likely to feel that their degree was a product of their own hard work and not

something that could be contributed to the efforts of college faculty, support services, or leadership. The phenomenon of minority and first-generation students believing they were the primary reason for their success versus students who came from a college-going family could be based on the cultural concept that one's work ethic and ability to work long, hard hours is a measurement of your success in this country. This is a value of hardworking families, who have sometimes immigrated to this country or work in labor-intensive jobs, pass it down to their children who were raised in the United States.

These results suggest that differences in race and Ethnicity could impact a student's perception or experience of the institution and whether they believe their success is a top priority. Because students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds will have a unique perspective, it is essential to understand that not all experiences will be the same. The college that serves as the site for this study is 46.4% White, 20% Hispanic, 12.5% Asian, and 11.6% Black; there is diversity on the campus; however, almost half of the population identifies as Caucasian. Because of this slant in demographics, students who are not from the predominant group may experience differences. In comparison, the neighboring county's community college has very different student demographics, including 47% Hispanic, 19% Black, 8% Asian, and 17% White. These demographics are worth consideration when understanding the lens through which the student experience may differ from community college district to community college district.

I also take gender into consideration as results varied between male and female students in regards to how students rated their overall experience at the institution and if they felt that it was a priority to the college that they finish their degree. Forty percent of males indicated they thought it was a moderate amount of a priority, and 50% of females thought it was a great deal of a priority to the college that they completed their degree. Current district statistics indicate that

the campus enrollment is 59.4% female and 40.6% male, suggesting that more females attend the college and prioritize higher education in this community college district. These enrollment trends are not unique to this district alone. An article published by the Wall Street Journal (Belkin, 2021) entitled “A Generation of American Men Give Up on College: ‘I Just Feel Lost’” indicates that the number of males attending two and four-year colleges has fallen record levels and mirrors this college’s enrollment at the national level with about 59.9% of college students being female, and 40.5% being male, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. These national trends could suggest that there are more reasons affecting reasons why males feel that their degree completion is less of a priority. Perhaps they feel that women are more actively recruited for historically male-dominated fields such as math and engineering, or perhaps male students are paying less attention to details during the college admissions process, missing important deadlines and documents.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include it not being generalizable due to the low response rate to the surveys and interviews and the site of the study, which is in one of the most affluent counties in the state of the study, Texas. One limitation of this study is the small sample size, which led to limited generalizability. The sample is not representative of the target population due to the lower-than-expected response rate. Because of a low response rate to the online survey and virtual interviews, I could not achieve a statistically significant number of responses to use for the data analysis. Due to the small sample size, the responses from the survey do not fully include an overall representation of the population. The responses from the qualitative interviews give limited opinions from student perspectives. I recognize this limitation and therefore do not suggest that the opinions and views of this study are generalizable to the study body as a whole

at this community college district. The student sample profile is also not reflective of the demographics of the college, as students from certain race/ethnicity groups are not represented adequately or at all. The county of the study site is considered to be one of the most affluent in the state, based on per capita income. The results are not generalizable to the rest of the state because of the limited sample and higher than average socioeconomic status of the county (SES).

I started the data collection process for this study in the summer of 2021, which is a timeframe impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I was limited in contacting students as most students were still remote (taking classes online or using virtual services) due to the pandemic. Even though the campus was open to students, in the summer of 2021, the campus had slower than usual student traffic. I was on campus two to three days per week and could not promote or recruit participants due to limited student traffic and presence on campus. The study site restricted my access to student emails and sent out the initial recruitment email and reminder emails on my behalf. I did not have access to the student's email addresses or contact information. Therefore, I could not connect with students on campus, nor did many volunteer to complete the survey that the college emailed them to their student email accounts. For these reasons, I had limited access to recruiting participants. I exhausted my resources to solicit participation. I tried multiple times to find students who met my criteria for inclusion when I was on campus but could not identify any students. The college emailed the participants the maximum number of allowable times on my behalf, but students did not click on the link to the survey. Given the circumstances of the 2020-2021 academic year, I believe that for many students completing a survey turned out to be one of their last priorities; therefore, this method of data collection and recruitment was limited due to the timing of the study in a global context.

In addition to the inadequate number of student participants, a lack of prior research also makes the results of this study limited, as it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions when there are no other similar studies to compare. At the same time, I was able to find existing research on other institutions administering and using the SSI; only very few correlated this data to degree completion rates. Schreiner (2009) found little empirical research that focused on connecting student satisfaction with student success, even though there are compelling reasons why it should be studied. Schreiner's research with over 60 colleges found that satisfaction was a critical predictor of student retention. For these reasons, I also agree that researchers should continue to study this topic.

I also found minimal research on the concept of leadership having an impact on degree completion. Due to the lack of research, many studies call for future studies to investigate the relationship between leadership and college completion (AACC, 2012; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011; Davis et al., 2015). While some existing research does exist in this area, most of it focuses on the factors that prevent a student from graduating, as opposed to factors that help them persist. This study aimed to contribute to this gap in the literature by asking respondents about their perceptions of leadership. I found that many students did not attribute their ability to complete a degree to be in any part because of the college's leadership.

The research design included the SSI institutional data set, a survey, and one-on-one interviews to address five research questions. Asking students to complete a survey, then volunteer to participate in an interview was challenging because while 32% indicated that they were interested in being contacted for a one-on-one virtual interview, only 16% clicked on the link in the email to sign up for the interview. In future studies, I would recommend combining both into one link so students can complete both the survey and interview at one time.

Recommendations

Based on the study results, I found that students' perceptions of degree completion are different than I anticipated, and the institutional factors at the college that they are satisfied with closely relate to their overall experience at the institution. I recommend the following suggestions for practical application: institutions should increase access to advisement by implementing a case management model; the college should improve communication by using a customer relationship management software; and lastly, the college should create a sense of belonging through more student programming and connection. I also recommend the following suggestions for areas of future research: conducting the study in different community college districts in Texas, including those that are larger and smaller; interviewing participants from community college districts that have different demographics, conducting the study with a larger group of participants, and conducting the study when more students are back to face to face instruction. Future studies need to center on the student's perceptions of institutional factors because there is often a disconnect between priorities at the college and priorities to the student. This study found that students perceive the college's leadership not to directly impact their success, while many institutions place student success as a top priority.

I drew logical conclusions and implications after conducting this study with students at a community college district in North Texas. In my study, I answered five research questions while considering the conceptual framework of the study and avoiding conclusions beyond what can be interpreted directly from what the results suggest. As a result, I believe it was essential to conduct this study because of the perceived connection between degree completion and the college's leadership. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand how students felt that their degree completion was supported by or prioritized by the institution. Because degree completion rates

are low for community colleges in Texas, I hoped to establish insight into the institution's role and how students perceive leadership as helping them obtain degree completion.

Recommendations for Practical Application

My first recommendation for practical application based on the results of my study is for institutions to increase access to advising services to students by implementing a case management or concierge model of advisement. The two areas students were least satisfied with, based on the 202 SSI institutional set, were a concern for the individual and academic advising/counseling. Based on the interviews I had with students, many voiced concerns about using these services because they felt that they received misinformation or could not get the help they needed. Colleges should implement a case management advisement model, so students have one person to work with throughout their entire degree program. Implementing a success coach model form of case management is one of the more effective forms of community college completion initiatives across the United States (Kilgore & Wilson, 2017). Some colleges have taken the success coach model further and broke the role into financial coaches, retention/career coaches, and traditional studies coaches (Achieving the Dream, 2018). From the time they complete the application to the college to the application for graduation, working with the same advisor throughout someone's degree program reduces the chances of misinformation or getting a different answer when asking someone else a similar question.

An advantage of using a case management model is that students can keep the same contact semester by semester, so if they have questions or need help at any point in their degree program, they have one consistent contact to reach out to for assistance. This person would be the point of contact for each student at the college, so they do experience the concern for the individual through individualized assistance. The case manager/advisor can also act as the liaison

between wraparound services. Current research into the impacts of alternative sources of support, including wraparound services, access to public benefits, tax preparation, and legal aid, suggests that students who used these services had a higher degree completion rate (Daughtery et al., 2020). During the interview, some of the services students mentioned needing access to included financial aid, scholarships, and student engagement. Using a case management model of advisement, the single point of contact (advisor) could connect students with the services and departments they need throughout their educational process, establishing checkpoints and recommendations on the next steps. Several students voiced concern at campus-wide scholarship communication, and I recommend using the single point of contact to inform students of available scholarships and deadlines. By dividing the active student population into reasonable caseloads, the college can ensure each student is accounted for and has a staff member tracking their retention, persistence, and ultimate completion.

Another recommendation is to improve campus-wide communication by using customer relationship management (CRM) software. Software companies like Salesforce®, Workday®, and Navigate®, produce student success management systems providing platforms to implement technology into a college's student success-focused framework. These companies see the trend in the students making college decisions the same way they make consumer decisions and cater to the student experience by using apps that students can access on a mobile phone (Hrnjic, 2016; Vander Schee, 2011). Based on the responses from the students in my data collection, many of them wanted to be more self-sufficient when it came to their degree plans and planning out classes each semester. They wanted the college to give them the tools they needed to be successful so they could figure it out themselves. Currently, the college posts general degree plans online and has a degree audit website in the student's online account, but it is not user-

friendly or intuitive for students to use without an advisor to help them navigate the process. Using a CRM, the college can provide one space for all students' degree and course planning, pertinent information for their success, important dates and deadlines, and an online community. Students expressed that they often did not get the information they needed via email, and as trends in communication with younger generations change, being able to access them via text messaging and social media increases the chances that they will see the message. By implementing a CRM model for communication, students can opt into text messages and alternative methods of communication rather than college email only. Low participation found in the response rates to my recruitment email suggests that students do not check their college email as a primary source for information. Using CRM software would allow the college to reach out to mass students to deliver time-sensitive information such as scholarship and registration deadlines.

An additional recommendation based on my data for practical application is to foster a sense of belonging on the campus and through the community. Based on the SSI institutional set, one of the areas students rated as least effective was concern for the individual. This factor measures if the students feel that the college, faculty members, advisors, and counselors care about and concern the student. This measure assesses the institution's priority to treating each student as an individual. Since concern for the individual was one of the lowest two metrics students were satisfied with, one of my recommendations is to increase their outward commitment to the students. One way an institution can increase student satisfaction in this area is to send personalized emails, text messages, and on-campus and virtual programming to foster a sense of belonging. Students suggested that if staff would take the time and guide students and had a caring and empathetic approach, they would have had a better experience at the college.

My recommendation for the case management/ concierge-style advisement model would also provide the single contact support students need to feel that they are a priority to the college and treat them as individuals. Assigning each student to an advisor gives them a point of contact for academic support and success.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, I recommend conducting this study in different community college districts in Texas, including more diverse and rural student populations that have different demographics. The average community college in Texas has approximately 7,200 students (Community College Review, 2021), while this district has over 30,000 across seven campuses. Lone Star College System and Dallas College rival each other as the largest community college districts in Texas. However, the site of this study is in the top five largest community college districts in the state. My recommendation is to recreate this study in other college districts or systems to examine how students' perceptions differ based on different campus sizes and regions, as it is possible students feel they receive more individual attention at a smaller campus that can provide more one on one attention than a larger district with several thousands of students.

A second recommendation for future research is to conduct the study with a larger group of participants. Due to many reasons, the number of student participants in this study was very low, as students did not respond to emails nor come on to campus during the summer months of recruitment. I would recommend trying this study again using multiple points of contact to attract student participation, including email, QR codes in highly trafficked areas, text messages, and incentives. With a larger and more diverse group of students, an institution could have a

clearer understanding of what their students value in terms of their experience earning a degree at the college.

Additionally, I believe future studies need to center on the students' perceptions of institutional factors because often, there is a disconnect between priorities at the college and priorities to the student. This study asked students a series of questions about their experiences at the institution, their perceptions of leadership and analyzed their satisfaction with various institutional factors of the college. For future studies, I encourage researchers to focus on the areas that students find most and least effective to set a benchmark for what they believe to be necessary and what areas they are or are not satisfied with.

As mentioned, during the summer of 2021, not all students had returned to campus to take face-to-face classes, and the majority of continuing students were still virtual, taking online classes. I would recommend conducting this study again outside of the pandemic, and global challenges present during the 2020-2021 academic year. Not only could this impact participation, but students may rate certain areas differently under different circumstances. For example, students' rated safety and security as one of the areas with the smallest gap score (most effective) in 2018, but it was an area of concern (least effective) in 2020.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there is still much to be understood about students' reasons for completing a college degree. While degree completion rates remain low for community college students statewide, the opportunity to investigate and explore this phenomenon continues. I studied students at a large community college district in North Texas to understand how they perceived the institution's college, staff, and leadership played a role in their ability to complete their degree program. I also referenced their satisfaction with institutional factors at the college and

considered their individual stories through one-on-one interviews. I learned that overall, students had a good experience at the college and that they found it particularly effective with certain areas of the college, including campus support services, academic services, and student centeredness. I also determined the areas they found least effective: academic advising/counseling, safety and security, and concern for the individual.

I used these metrics and answers to the student survey and interviews to suggest recommendations for practical application at colleges and future research. The results of the study, concerning Tinto's theory of student departure, critical race theory, and prior research on student retention, persistence, and completion suggest that student's perceptions and unique based on their own experiences, including their experience based on gender and race/ethnicity, and within the college.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to helping students be successful, but my recommendations include streamlining the process of graduation by implementing a single point of contact advising model and using student success CRM software. By implementing these two recommendations, students can improve their relationship with the staff at the college by working with their case manager, who can suggest appropriate wraparound services, and give them the power to control their educational journey by utilizing user-friendly software that takes the place of several programs and lists out how to complete their degree in a readable way.

Because there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of low degree completion, I encourage higher education institutions to find out what works best for their students. I based my recommendations on the findings for this population, but I believe that they may be different for other districts. There are many challenges to the community college completion conundrum, including the recent trends in higher education and virtual learning, which have caused many

students to drop out and contributed to drops in enrollment. At this point, some community colleges struggle to maintain enrollment and access to state funding. Conversely, some community college districts are growing to keep up with the demands of their student population. I recommend that the leadership of these institutions examine what is working and what is not working and ask their students how they can be of better service to them. From my experience in working with students, many diverse barriers prevent their ultimate completion of a degree, but at the same time, many resiliency factors keep them on track.

This information suggests that while a student's experience will vary depending on the college while completing their degree, studying the differences in some of these students' experiences could clarify why there are such significant gaps. The study suggests the need for future research to fully understand how these concepts contribute to a student's ability to complete a degree.

Because results for the impact of student satisfaction, institutional priorities, and degree completion are still important to examine, I recommend additional studies to understand these relationships further. One of the main reasons for studying this linkage was the lack of prior studies connecting students' degree completion and leadership. While this study was able to identify some aspects of institutional priorities and factors that assisted the students in their matriculation, future research could expand on the roles of the college in terms of students' perceptions.

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Appendix A: Student Satisfaction Inventory Report

Strengths and Challenges	
	vs. Comparison
31. The campus is safe and secure for all students.	🟢
70. I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	🟢
58. Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their fields.	🟢
11. Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	🟢
51. There are convenient ways of paying my school bill.	🟢
71. Campus item: I can easily find information about my tuition charges each semester.	
68. On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.	🟢
69. There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	🟢
34. Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	🟢
14. Library resources and services are adequate.	🟢
26. Library staff are helpful and approachable.	🟢
50. Tutoring services are readily available.	🟢
45. This institution has a good reputation within the community.	🟢
60. Billing policies are reasonable.	🟢
61. Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	🟢
36. Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	🟢
21. There are a sufficient number of study areas on campus.	🟢
Challenges	
18. The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	
78. Campus item: I am clear about the next steps for completing my degree/certificate requirements.	
32. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about my program requirements.	
46. Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	🟢
15. I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	
35. Policies and procedures regarding registration and course selection are clear and well-publicized.	
73. Campus item: I can easily find information I need at the North College website.	
20. Financial aid counselors are helpful.	🟢
40. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about the transfer requirements of other schools.	
13. Financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	🟢
23. Faculty are understanding of students' unique life circumstances.	
47. There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	
Benchmarks	
Higher Satisfaction vs. National Community Colleges	
31. The campus is safe and secure for all students.	
70. I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	
58. Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their fields.	
11. Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	
51. There are convenient ways of paying my school bill.	
29. Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	
46. Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	
41. Admissions staff are knowledgeable.	
68. On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.	
69. There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	
34. Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	
14. Library resources and services are adequate.	
48. Counseling staff care about students as individuals.	
20. Financial aid counselors are helpful.	
43. Class change (drop/add) policies are reasonable.	
26. Library staff are helpful and approachable.	
50. Tutoring services are readily available.	
42. The equipment in the lab facilities is kept up to date.	
45. This institution has a good reputation within the community.	
60. Billing policies are reasonable.	
13. Financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	
52. This school does whatever it can to help me reach my educational goals.	
61. Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	
36. Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	
5. The personnel involved in registration are helpful.	
Higher Importance vs. National Community Colleges	
31. The campus is safe and secure for all students.	
11. Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	

51. There are convenient ways of paying my school bill.	
46. Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	
34. Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	
14. Library resources and services are adequate.	
48. Counseling staff care about students as individuals.	
20. Financial aid counselors are helpful.	
43. Class change (drop/add) policies are reasonable.	
26. Library staff are helpful and approachable.	
50. Tutoring services are readily available.	
46. This institution has a good reputation within the community.	
60. Billing policies are reasonable.	
13. Financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	
56. Academic support services adequately meet the needs of students.	
47. There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	

Sort on each column to see data from highest to lowest.

Item	XXX College - SSI			National Community Colleges			Difference
	Importance	Satisfaction / SD	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction / SD	Gap	
1. Most students feel a sense of belonging here.	5.99	5.66 / 1.40	0.34	5.86	5.57 / 1.37	0.29	0.08
2. Faculty care about me as an individual.	6.19	5.68 / 1.45	0.51	6.12	5.61 / 1.42	0.51	0.07
3. The quality of instruction in the vocational/technical programs is excellent.	6.31	5.66 / 1.42	0.65	6.21	5.60 / 1.37	0.61	0.06
4. Security staff are helpful.	6.28	5.91 / 1.37	0.37	6.02	5.55 / 1.51	0.47	0.36 ***
5. The personnel involved in registration are helpful.	6.40	5.88 / 1.38	0.52	6.31	5.66 / 1.52	0.65	0.22 ***
6. My academic advisor is approachable.	6.45	5.80 / 1.51	0.65	6.37	5.75 / 1.57	0.62	0.05
7. Adequate financial aid is available for most students.	6.35	5.62 / 1.66	0.73	6.31	5.48 / 1.64	0.83	0.14
8. Classes are scheduled at times that are convenient for me.	6.46	5.79 / 1.45	0.67	6.44	5.69 / 1.47	0.75	0.10
9. Internships or practical experiences are provided in my degree/certificate program.	6.15	5.23 / 1.71	0.92	6.09	5.28 / 1.64	0.81	-0.05
10. Child care facilities are available on campus.	5.50	5.09 / 1.97	0.41	4.96	4.58 / 1.92	0.38	0.51 ***
★ 11. Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	6.56	6.18 / 1.20	0.38	6.26	5.54 / 1.46	0.72	0.64 ***
12. My academic advisor helps me set goals to work toward.	6.29	5.48 / 1.75	0.81	6.18	5.41 / 1.74	0.77	0.07
† 13. Financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	6.41	5.69 / 1.63	0.72	6.23	5.32 / 1.68	0.91	0.37 ***
★ 14. Library resources and services are adequate.	6.46	6.17 / 1.24	0.29	6.29	5.96 / 1.28	0.33	0.21 ***
† 15. I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	6.49	5.73 / 1.52	0.76	6.43	5.71 / 1.47	0.72	0.02
16. The college shows concern for students as individuals.	6.28	5.56 / 1.61	0.69	6.22	5.44 / 1.57	0.78	0.15 *
17. Personnel in the Veterans' Services program are helpful.	6.12	5.88 / 1.44	0.24	5.57	5.22 / 1.53	0.35	0.66 ***
† 18. The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	6.55	5.78 / 1.41	0.77	6.48	5.69 / 1.39	0.79	0.09
19. This campus provides effective support services for displaced homemakers.	6.09	5.75 / 1.48	0.34	5.88	5.24 / 1.51	0.44	0.51 ***
† 20. Financial aid counselors are helpful.	6.45	5.75 / 1.56	0.70	6.25	5.42 / 1.67	0.83	0.33 ***
★ 21. There are a sufficient number of study areas on campus.	6.38	6.02 / 1.36	0.36	6.22	5.85 / 1.41	0.37	0.17 **
22. People on this campus respect and are supportive of each other.	6.37	5.99 / 1.31	0.38	6.20	5.72 / 1.35	0.48	0.27 ***
† 23. Faculty are understanding of students' unique life circumstances.	6.40	5.64 / 1.62	0.76	6.29	5.54 / 1.54	0.75	0.10
24. Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.	6.37	5.77 / 1.49	0.60	6.24	5.54 / 1.57	0.70	0.23 ***
25. My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.	6.29	5.37 / 1.75	0.92	6.26	5.44 / 1.71	0.82	-0.07
★ 26. Library staff are helpful and approachable.	6.43	6.22 / 1.21	0.21	6.16	5.92 / 1.32	0.24	0.30 ***
27. The campus staff are caring and helpful.	6.37	6.03 / 1.29	0.34	6.27	5.83 / 1.30	0.44	0.20 ***
28. It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.	6.32	5.93 / 1.36	0.39	6.27	5.76 / 1.43	0.51	0.17 **
29. Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	6.50	5.89 / 1.46	0.61	6.38	5.70 / 1.48	0.68	0.19 **
30. The career services office provides students with the help they need to get a job.	6.36	5.71 / 1.52	0.65	6.15	5.49 / 1.49	0.66	0.22 **
★ 31. The campus is safe and secure for all students.	6.64	6.22 / 1.17	0.42	6.47	5.94 / 1.27	0.53	0.28 ***
† 32. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about my program requirements.	6.50	5.69 / 1.62	0.81	6.43	5.71 / 1.61	0.72	-0.02
33. Admissions counselors accurately portray the campus in their recruiting practices.	6.35	5.82 / 1.50	0.53	6.09	5.58 / 1.46	0.51	0.24 ***
★ 34. Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	6.47	6.24 / 1.17	0.23	6.30	5.95 / 1.32	0.35	0.29 ***
† 35. Policies and procedures regarding registration and course selection are clear and well-publicized.	6.46	5.76 / 1.48	0.70	6.32	5.71 / 1.42	0.61	0.05
★ 36. Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	6.40	6.14 / 1.21	0.26	6.33	5.91 / 1.32	0.42	0.23 ***
37. Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course.	6.31	5.61 / 1.57	0.70	6.22	5.48 / 1.52	0.74	0.13 *
38. The student center is a comfortable place for students to spend their leisure time.	6.18	5.96 / 1.36	0.22	6.01	5.72 / 1.41	0.29	0.24 ***
39. The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.	6.30	4.87 / 1.94	1.43	6.25	5.14 / 1.88	1.11	-0.27 ***
† 40. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about the transfer requirements of other schools.	6.45	5.49 / 1.74	0.96	6.32	5.53 / 1.64	0.79	-0.04
41. Admissions staff are knowledgeable.	6.49	5.90 / 1.46	0.59	6.34	5.76 / 1.41	0.58	0.14 *
42. The equipment in the lab facilities is kept up to date.	6.42	5.98 / 1.34	0.44	6.28	5.72 / 1.41	0.56	0.26 ***
43. Class change (drop/add) policies are reasonable.	6.45	5.95 / 1.43	0.50	6.27	5.79 / 1.43	0.48	0.16 **
44. I generally know what's happening on campus.	5.94	5.46 / 1.58	0.48	5.81	5.34 / 1.59	0.47	0.12
★ 45. This institution has a good reputation within the community.	6.42	6.23 / 1.15	0.19	6.22	5.89 / 1.34	0.33	0.34 ***
† 46. Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	6.50	5.74 / 1.44	0.76	6.33	5.57 / 1.49	0.76	0.17 **
† 47. There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	6.39	5.69 / 1.51	0.70	6.23	5.57 / 1.49	0.66	0.12

Item	XXX College - SSI			National Community Colleges			Difference
	Importance	Satisfaction / SD	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction / SD	Gap	
48. Counseling staff care about students as individuals.	6.46	5.97 / 1.38	0.49	6.26	5.65 / 1.49	0.61	0.32 ***
49. Admissions counselors respond to prospective students' unique needs and requests.	6.36	5.75 / 1.50	0.61	6.20	5.61 / 1.46	0.59	0.14 *
★ 50. Tutoring services are readily available.	6.43	6.10 / 1.25	0.33	6.26	5.84 / 1.40	0.42	0.26 ***
★ 51. There are convenient ways of paying my school bill.	6.52	6.21 / 1.20	0.31	6.33	5.78 / 1.45	0.55	0.43 ***
52. This school does whatever it can to help me reach my educational goals.	6.41	5.80 / 1.41	0.61	6.34	5.58 / 1.50	0.76	0.22 ***
53. The assessment and course placement procedures are reasonable.	6.38	5.89 / 1.38	0.49	6.23	5.70 / 1.40	0.53	0.19 **
54. Faculty are interested in my academic problems.	6.28	5.60 / 1.55	0.68	6.19	5.50 / 1.53	0.69	0.10
55. Academic support services adequately meet the needs of students.	6.41	5.78 / 1.49	0.63	6.24	5.66 / 1.41	0.58	0.12
56. The business office is open during hours which are convenient for most students.	6.36	5.96 / 1.32	0.40	6.20	5.70 / 1.41	0.50	0.26 ***
57. Administrators are approachable to students.	6.31	5.74 / 1.50	0.57	6.22	5.66 / 1.46	0.56	0.08
★ 58. Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their fields.	6.59	6.04 / 1.32	0.55	6.45	5.91 / 1.31	0.54	0.13 *
59. New student orientation services help students adjust to college.	6.25	5.80 / 1.48	0.45	6.08	5.59 / 1.52	0.49	0.21 **
★ 60. Billing policies are reasonable.	6.42	6.03 / 1.25	0.39	6.25	5.67 / 1.45	0.58	0.36 ***
★ 61. Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	6.41	6.10 / 1.25	0.31	6.33	5.88 / 1.33	0.45	0.22 ***
62. Bookstore staff are helpful.	6.31	6.00 / 1.29	0.22	6.18	5.87 / 1.41	0.31	0.22 ***
63. I seldom get the "run-around" when seeking information on this campus.	6.24	5.62 / 1.59	0.62	6.13	5.40 / 1.64	0.73	0.22 **
64. Nearly all classes deal with practical experiences and applications.	6.32	5.73 / 1.42	0.59	6.23	5.66 / 1.40	0.57	0.07
65. Students are notified early in the term if they are doing poorly in a class.	6.31	5.29 / 1.62	1.02	6.25	5.27 / 1.74	0.98	0.02
66. Program requirements are clear and reasonable.	6.49	5.85 / 1.39	0.64	6.40	5.82 / 1.37	0.58	0.03
67. Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available.	6.24	5.28 / 1.84	0.96	6.12	5.26 / 1.70	0.86	0.02
★ 68. On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.	6.49	6.30 / 1.06	0.19	6.35	6.05 / 1.25	0.30	0.25 ***
★ 69. There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	6.49	6.19 / 1.17	0.30	6.41	5.93 / 1.33	0.48	0.26 ***
★ 70. I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	6.61	6.20 / 1.21	0.41	6.46	6.01 / 1.27	0.45	0.19 ***
★ 71. Campus item: I can easily find information about my tuition charges each semester.	6.50	6.17 / 1.24	0.33				
72. Campus item: North College provides adequate resources to support students who face academic challenges.	6.46	5.88 / 1.41	0.58				
73. Campus item: I can easily find information I need at the North College website.	6.46	5.62 / 1.57	0.84				
74. Campus item: I know about the academic and career planning resources available on the North website.	6.28	5.62 / 1.56	0.66				
75. Campus item: I am able to select necessary courses for my degree/certificate without assistance from an advisor.	6.38	5.70 / 1.58	0.68				
76. Campus item: I am clear about the next steps for completing my degree/certificate requirements.	6.53	5.62 / 1.63	0.91				
77. Campus item: I would like to consult a faculty advisor as part of my academic advising process.	6.25	5.79 / 1.50	0.46				
78. Campus item: Veteran services at North meet my needs.	6.23	5.92 / 1.40	0.31				
79. Campus item: The new student orientation session I attended during my first semester was beneficial.	6.05	5.50 / 1.66	0.46				
80. Campus item: The space where academic advisors meet with students is adequate.	6.27	6.01 / 1.29	0.26				
81. Institution's commitment to part-time students?		6.02 / 1.25			5.86 / 1.36		0.16 **
82. Institution's commitment to evening students?		5.88 / 1.40			5.73 / 1.45		0.15 *
83. Institution's commitment to older, returning learners?		6.05 / 1.34			5.83 / 1.42		0.22 ***
84. Institution's commitment to under-represented populations?		5.90 / 1.44			5.75 / 1.41		0.15 *
85. Institution's commitment to commuters?		5.77 / 1.48			5.73 / 1.44		0.04
86. Institution's commitment to students with disabilities?		6.07 / 1.33			5.88 / 1.37		0.19 **
87. Cost as factor in decision to enroll.	6.41			6.38			
88. Financial aid as factor in decision to enroll.	6.00			6.14			
89. Academic reputation as factor in decision to enroll.	6.11			5.99			
90. Size of institution as factor in decision to enroll.	5.40			5.30			
91. Opportunity to play sports as factor in decision to enroll.	4.07			3.88			
92. Recommendations from family/friends as factor in decision to enroll.	5.29			5.15			
93. Geographic setting as factor in decision to enroll.	6.00			6.65			
94. Campus appearance as factor in decision to enroll.	5.41			5.38			
95. Personalized attention prior to enrollment as factor in decision to enroll.	5.46			5.55			

National Group Means are based on 143390 records

*Difference statistically significant at the .05 level

**Difference statistically significant at the .01 level

***Difference statistically significant at the .001 level

Sort on each column to see data from highest to lowest.

Scale / Item	XXX College - SSI			National Community Colleges			Difference
	Importance	Satisfaction / SD	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction / SD	Gap	
Student Centeredness	6.27	5.84 / 1.21	0.43	6.19	5.69 / 1.18	0.50	0.15 ***
Instructional Effectiveness	6.43	5.82 / 1.18	0.61	6.32	5.69 / 1.12	0.63	0.13 **
Responsiveness to Diverse Populations		5.94 / 1.30			5.80 / 1.27		0.14 **
Campus Support Services	6.15	5.72 / 1.33	0.43	5.86	5.40 / 1.28	0.46	0.32 ***
Safety and Security	6.44	5.77 / 1.13	0.67	6.25	5.54 / 1.19	0.71	0.23 ***
Academic Advising/Counseling	6.41	5.66 / 1.32	0.75	6.31	5.58 / 1.36	0.73	0.08
Admissions and Financial Aid	6.40	5.76 / 1.31	0.64	6.24	5.53 / 1.27	0.71	0.23 ***
Academic Services	6.43	6.08 / 1.10	0.35	6.25	5.85 / 1.06	0.40	0.23 ***
Registration Effectiveness	6.43	5.93 / 1.04	0.50	6.31	5.73 / 1.06	0.58	0.20 ***
Service Excellence	6.29	5.83 / 1.09	0.46	6.16	5.63 / 1.12	0.53	0.20 ***
Concern for the Individual	6.34	5.69 / 1.28	0.65	6.25	5.57 / 1.26	0.68	0.12 *
Campus Climate	6.29	5.82 / 1.10	0.47	6.18	5.64 / 1.13	0.54	0.18 ***

National Group Means are based on 143360 records

*Difference statistically significant at the .05 level

**Difference statistically significant at the .01 level

***Difference statistically significant at the .001 level

Summary	XXX College - SSI	National Community Colleges	Difference
So far, how has your college experience met your expectations?	5.14	4.98	0.16 **
1=Much worse than expected	0%	1%	
2=Quite a bit worse than I expected	1%	1%	
3=Worse than I expected	4%	6%	
4=About what I expected	30%	31%	
5=Better than I expected	23%	24%	
6=Quite a bit better than I expected	16%	14%	
7=Much better than expected	22%	19%	
Rate your overall satisfaction with your experience here thus far.	5.66	5.58	0.08
1=Not satisfied at all	0%	1%	
2=Not very satisfied	2%	2%	
3=Somewhat dissatisfied	3%	4%	
4=Neutral	11%	11%	
5=Somewhat satisfied	15%	15%	
6=Satisfied	36%	39%	
7=Very satisfied	29%	25%	
All in all, if you had to do it over, would you enroll here again?	6.09	5.83	0.26 ***
1=Definitely not	1%	2%	
2=Probably not	2%	3%	
3=Maybe not	2%	2%	
4=I don't know	8%	7%	
5=Maybe yes	7%	10%	
6=Probably yes	27%	30%	
7=Definitely yes	52%	43%	

Sort on each column to see data from highest to lowest.

This report provides a look at the percentage of responses that indicated an answer of 6 or 7 to the items in the survey; 6 is considered "important" or "satisfied" and 7 is considered "very important" or "very satisfied."

Item	XXX College - SSI			National Community Colleges			Difference
	Importance %	Satisfaction %	Gap	Importance %	Satisfaction %	Gap	
1. Most students feel a sense of belonging here.	73%	62%	11%	66%	60%	8%	2%
2. Faculty care about me as an individual.	79%	63%	16%	77%	62%	15%	1%
3. The quality of instruction in the vocational/technical programs is excellent.	83%	62%	21%	80%	61%	19%	1%
4. Security staff are helpful.	80%	70%	10%	73%	60%	13%	10%
5. The personnel involved in registration are helpful.	86%	71%	15%	83%	65%	18%	6%
6. My academic advisor is approachable.	86%	67%	19%	84%	66%	16%	-1%
7. Adequate financial aid is available for most students.	83%	63%	20%	83%	60%	23%	3%
8. Classes are scheduled at times that are convenient for me.	86%	65%	21%	86%	64%	22%	1%
9. Internships or practical experiences are provided in my degree/certificate program.	75%	49%	26%	75%	52%	23%	-3%
10. Child care facilities are available on campus.	60%	49%	11%	50%	37%	13%	12%
★ 11. Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	90%	79%	11%	80%	58%	22%	21%
12. My academic advisor helps me set goals to work toward.	80%	59%	21%	79%	58%	21%	1%
✖ 13. Financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	84%	64%	20%	80%	54%	26%	10%
★ 14. Library resources and services are adequate.	86%	78%	8%	81%	72%	9%	6%
✖ 15. I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	88%	66%	22%	87%	66%	21%	0%
16. The college shows concern for students as individuals.	80%	64%	16%	80%	57%	23%	7%
17. Personnel in the Veterans' Services program are helpful.	75%	67%	8%	61%	47%	14%	20%
✖ 18. The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	91%	67%	24%	88%	64%	24%	3%
19. This campus provides effective support services for displaced homemakers.	76%	65%	11%	64%	48%	16%	17%
✖ 20. Financial aid counselors are helpful.	86%	66%	20%	81%	58%	23%	8%
★ 21. There are a sufficient number of study areas on campus.	83%	75%	8%	79%	69%	10%	6%
22. People on this campus respect and are supportive of each other.	84%	72%	12%	79%	65%	14%	7%
✖ 23. Faculty are understanding of students' unique life circumstances.	85%	64%	21%	82%	60%	22%	4%
24. Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.	83%	66%	17%	80%	61%	19%	5%
25. My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.	81%	58%	23%	81%	59%	22%	-1%
★ 26. Library staff are helpful and approachable.	85%	80%	5%	77%	71%	6%	9%
27. The campus staff are caring and helpful.	84%	75%	9%	81%	68%	13%	7%
28. It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.	81%	71%	10%	81%	67%	14%	4%
29. Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	88%	73%	15%	85%	66%	19%	7%
30. The career services office provides students with the help they need to get a job.	82%	63%	19%	77%	57%	20%	6%
★ 31. The campus is safe and secure for all students.	92%	81%	11%	87%	72%	15%	9%
✖ 32. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about my program requirements.	86%	67%	21%	86%	67%	19%	0%
33. Admissions counselors accurately portray the campus in their recruiting practices.	83%	70%	13%	76%	60%	16%	10%
★ 34. Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	87%	80%	7%	82%	72%	10%	8%
✖ 35. Policies and procedures regarding registration and course selection are clear and well-publicized.	87%	67%	20%	83%	65%	18%	2%
★ 36. Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	84%	77%	7%	83%	71%	12%	6%
37. Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course.	83%	62%	21%	80%	58%	22%	4%
38. The student center is a comfortable place for students to spend their leisure time.	78%	72%	6%	72%	65%	7%	7%
39. The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.	82%	47%	35%	81%	53%	28%	-6%
✖ 40. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about the transfer requirements of other schools.	86%	62%	24%	83%	61%	22%	1%
41. Admissions staff are knowledgeable.	89%	73%	16%	84%	67%	17%	6%
42. The equipment in the lab facilities is kept up to date.	86%	73%	13%	82%	65%	17%	8%
43. Class change (drop/add) policies are reasonable.	86%	72%	14%	81%	68%	13%	4%
44. I generally know what's happening on campus.	68%	58%	10%	66%	54%	12%	4%
★ 45. This institution has a good reputation within the community.	86%	80%	6%	80%	71%	9%	9%
✖ 46. Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	88%	65%	23%	84%	61%	23%	4%
✖ 47. There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	85%	64%	21%	80%	60%	20%	4%
48. Counseling staff care about students as individuals.	87%	74%	13%	81%	63%	18%	11%
49. Admissions counselors respond to prospective students' unique needs and requests.	84%	67%	17%	79%	62%	17%	5%
★ 50. Tutoring services are readily available.	87%	77%	10%	81%	69%	12%	8%
★ 51. There are convenient ways of paying my school bill.	88%	79%	9%	83%	66%	15%	11%
52. This school does whatever it can to help me reach my educational goals.	85%	68%	17%	84%	61%	23%	7%
53. The assessment and course placement procedures are reasonable.	84%	71%	13%	80%	65%	15%	6%
54. Faculty are interested in my academic problems.	80%	62%	18%	79%	59%	20%	3%

Item	XXX College - SSI			National Community Colleges			Difference
	Importance %	Satisfaction %	Gap	Importance %	Satisfaction %	Gap	
55. Academic support services adequately meet the needs of students.	86%	67%	19%	80%	63%	17%	4%
56. The business office is open during hours which are convenient for most students.	83%	73%	10%	79%	64%	15%	9%
57. Administrators are approachable to students.	81%	66%	15%	80%	64%	16%	2%
★ 58. Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their fields.	90%	75%	15%	87%	72%	15%	3%
59. New student orientation services help students adjust to college.	80%	67%	13%	76%	62%	14%	5%
★ 60. Billing policies are reasonable.	85%	74%	11%	81%	64%	17%	10%
★ 61. Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	86%	78%	8%	83%	70%	13%	8%
62. Bookstore staff are helpful.	82%	77%	5%	78%	70%	8%	7%
63. I seldom get the "run-around" when seeking information on this campus.	81%	64%	17%	77%	57%	20%	7%
64. Nearly all classes deal with practical experiences and applications.	82%	64%	18%	80%	63%	17%	1%
65. Students are notified early in the term if they are doing poorly in a class.	82%	57%	25%	81%	54%	27%	3%
66. Program requirements are clear and reasonable.	89%	69%	20%	86%	69%	17%	0%
67. Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available.	79%	56%	23%	77%	53%	24%	3%
★ 68. On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.	88%	83%	5%	84%	76%	8%	7%
★ 69. There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	88%	79%	9%	86%	72%	14%	7%
★ 70. I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	92%	78%	14%	87%	74%	13%	4%
★ 71. Campus item: I can easily find information about my tuition charges each semester.	89%	79%	10%				
72. Campus item: North College provides adequate resources to support students who face academic challenges.	87%	70%	17%				
★ 73. Campus item: I can easily find information I need at the North College website.	88%	62%	26%				
74. Campus item: I know about the academic and career planning resources available on the North website.	83%	63%	20%				
75. Campus item: I am able to select necessary courses for my degree/certificate without assistance from an advisor.	83%	66%	18%				
★ 76. Campus item: I am clear about the next steps for completing my degree/certificate requirements.	89%	63%	26%				
77. Campus item: I would like to consult a faculty advisor as part of my academic advising process.	80%	69%	11%				
78. Campus item: Veteran services at North meet my needs.	80%	70%	10%				
79. Campus item: The new student orientation session I attended during my first semester was beneficial.	76%	62%	14%				
80. Campus item: The space where academic advisors meet with students is adequate.	80%	74%	6%				
81. Institution's commitment to part-time students?		73%			69%		4%
82. Institution's commitment to evening students?		71%			66%		5%
83. Institution's commitment to older, returning learners?		75%			69%		6%
84. Institution's commitment to under-represented populations?		71%			66%		5%
85. Institution's commitment to commuters?		67%			66%		1%
86. Institution's commitment to students with disabilities?		76%			70%		6%
87. Cost as factor in decision to enroll.	85%			85%			
88. Financial aid as factor in decision to enroll.	74%			79%			
89. Academic reputation as factor in decision to enroll.	75%			73%			
90. Size of institution as factor in decision to enroll.	58%			55%			
91. Opportunity to play sports as factor in decision to enroll.	35%			33%			
92. Recommendations from family/friends as factor in decision to enroll.	56%			52%			
93. Geographic setting as factor in decision to enroll.	75%			64%			
94. Campus appearance as factor in decision to enroll.	59%			57%			
95. Personalized attention prior to enrollment as factor in decision to enroll.	59%			61%			

National Group Means are based on 143390 records

* Indicates the response option that was selected by the majority of survey participants.

Gender

		N	%
*	Female	401	61.80%
	Male	250	38.40%
	Total	651	100%
	No Answer	102	

Age

		N	%
	18 and under	52	7.99%
*	19 to 24	342	52.53%
	25 to 34	113	17.36%
	35 to 44	72	11.06%
	45 and over	72	11.06%
	Total	651	100%
	No Answer	102	

Ethnicity/Race

		N	%
	African-American	85	11.87%
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	0.28%
	Asian or Pacific Islander	107	14.94%
*	Caucasian/White	303	42.32%
	Hispanic	132	18.44%
	Other race	41	5.73%
	Race - Prefer not to respond	46	6.42%
	Total	718	100%
	No Answer	37	

Current Enrollment Status

		N	%
*	Day	543	78.69%
	Evening	152	21.47%
	Weekend	13	1.84%
	Total	708	100%
	No Answer	45	

Current Class Load

		N	%
*	Full-time	391	55.62%
	Part-time	312	44.38%
	Total	703	100%
	No Answer	50	

Class Level

		N	%
	1 year or less	245	35.00%
*	2 years	297	42.43%
	3 years	100	14.29%
	4 or more years	58	8.29%
	Total	700	100%
	No Answer	53	

Current GPA

		N	%
	No credits earned	18	2.60%
	1.99 or below	21	3.04%
	2.0 - 2.49	78	11.29%
	2.5 - 2.99	114	16.50%

Current Residence

		N	%
	Residence hall	2	0.29%
	Own house	168	24.56%
	Rent room or apt off campus	132	19.30%
*	Parent's home	339	49.56%
	Other residence	43	6.29%
	Total	684	100%
	No Answer	69	

Residence Classification

		N	%
*	In-state	623	91.36%
	Out-of-state	17	2.49%
	International (not U.S. citizen)	42	6.16%
	Total	682	100%
	No Answer	71	

Disabilities

		N	%
	Yes - Disability	81	11.88%
*	No - Disability	601	88.12%
	Total	682	100%
	No Answer	71	

Institution Was My

		N	%
*	1st choice	567	77.67%
	2nd choice	130	17.81%
	3rd choice or lower	33	4.52%
	Total	730	100%
	No Answer	23	

What is the primary campus you attended?

		N	%
*	Campus	345	46.75%
	Campus	197	26.66%
	Campus	163	22.09%
	Distance Learning	15	2.03%
	Other location	18	2.44%
	Campus item - Answer 6	0	0%
	Total	738	100%
	No Answer	15	

Institution Question 2

		N	%
*	Campus item 2 - Answer 1	0	0%
*	Campus item 2 - Answer 2	0	0%
*	Campus item 2 - Answer 3	0	0%
*	Campus item 2 - Answer 4	0	0%
*	Campus item 2 - Answer 5	0	0%
*	Campus item 2 - Answer 6	0	0%
	Total	0	100%
	No Answer	753	

		N	%

Appendix B: Community College Student Integration Interview Protocol

Part 1: Pre-Interview Survey: Demographic Questions

1. What is your current role at the college?
 - a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Transfer
 - d. Other
2. What is your current desired employment profession?
3. Gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary/third gender
 - d. Prefer not to say
4. Age
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 26-29
 - c. 30-35
 - d. 36-40
 - e. 41-45
 - f. 46-50
 - g. 51 and older
5. Race/Ethnicity
 - a. African American
 - b. Asian/Pacific Island
 - c. Caucasian/White
 - d. Hispanic
 - e. Native American
 - f. Other
6. Highest Education Completed
 - a. Middle School
 - b. High School Diploma
 - c. GED or equivalent
 - d. Certificate Level I
 - e. Certificate Level II
 - f. Other

Part 2: Survey Questions (multiple choice)

1. How many semesters have you taken classes at the community college?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5 or more
2. How would you rate your overall experience as a student at this institution?
 - a. Excellent
 - b. Good
 - c. Average
 - d. Fair
 - e. Poor
3. How often do you feel supported by the faculty, staff, and administrators at your college?
 - a. Always
 - b. Frequently
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never
4. How often do you feel like you can talk to your instructors when you need help?
 - a. Always
 - b. Frequently
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never
5. How much of a priority do you think it is to your instructors that you complete your degree?
 - a. A great deal
 - b. A lot
 - c. A moderate amount
 - d. A little
 - e. None at all
6. How often do you seek student support services (i.e. admissions, advising, and financial aid)?
 - a. Always
 - b. Frequently
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never
7. How much of a priority do you think it is to the college overall that you complete your degree?
 - a. A great deal
 - b. A lot
 - c. A moderate amount
 - d. A little

- e. None at all
- 8. Are you interested in being contacted for a one-on-one virtual interview?
 - a. I am interested: Please check initial email for sign up link
 - b. I am not interested

Part 3: Qualitative Interview Questions

1. How confident are you that you will graduate with a certificate or degree?
2. What factors do you think impact your ability to complete your degree?
3. How often do you seek help from your instructors or other staff members when you have questions about how to complete your degree?
4. What role do you think your instructors have on your ability to complete your degree?
5. What role do you think the college staff have on your ability to complete your degree?
6. What role do you think the college administrators have in supporting your ability to complete your degree?
7. What experiences with the institution most impact your ability to complete your degree?
8. Do you think leadership of the college, and student support services (i.e., advising, admissions, and financial aid) impact your ability to complete your degree?
9. How could the college support you more currently as you finish your program?
10. If you were in charge, what would you suggest to help struggling students complete their degree?

Appendix C: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

March 30, 2021



Estelle Garza, M. Ed.
Departments of Organizational/Educational Leadership
Abilene Christian University

Dear Estelle,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Student Satisfaction and Degree Completion",

(IRB# 21-041) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Additional Approvals/Instructions:

WAIVER OF DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT, based on the following justification:

* The research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects, and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

The following are all responsibilities of the Primary Investigator (PI). Violation of these responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of research by the Institutional Review Board. If the Primary Investigator is a student and fails to fulfil any of these responsibilities, the Faculty Advisor then becomes responsible for completing or upholding any and all of the following:

- If there are any changes in the research (including but not limited to change in location, members of the research team, research procedures, number of participants, target population of participants, compensation, or risk), these changes **must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation**.
- Report any protocol deviations or unanticipated problems to the IRB promptly according to IRB policy.
- Should the research continue past the expiration date, submit a Continuing Review Form, along with a copy of the current consent form and a *new* Signature Assurance Form approximately 30 days before the expiration date.
- When the research is completed, inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. If your study is Expedited or Full Board, submit an Inactivation Request Form and a *new* Signature Assurance Form. If your study is Exempt, Non-Research, or Non-Human Research, email orsp@acu.edu to indicate that the research has finished.
- According to ACU policy, research data must be stored on ACU campus (or electronically) for 3 years from inactivation of the study, in a manner that is secure but accessible should the IRB request access.
- It is the Investigator's responsibility to maintain a general environment of safety for all research participants and all members of the research team. All risks to physical, mental, and emotional well-being as well as any risks to confidentiality should be minimized.

For additional information on the policies and procedures above, please visit the IRB website <http://www.acu.edu/community/offices/academic/orsp/human-research/overview.html>

or email orsp@acu.edu with your questions.