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Exploring the Antecedents to Persistence Beliefs and Behaviours in Science Students

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Previous research has established that the number of undergraduate students completing STEM degrees is decreasing (e.g., Shedlosky-Shoemaker & Fautch, 2015; Simon et al., 2015; Sithole et al., 2017), and that there are greater rates of attrition by women and under-represented minorities (e.g., Adams et al., 2013) (i.e., the leaky pipeline). The vast majority of investigations on student persistence, retention, and attrition have occurred in the United States, with scant research occurring within the Canadian context. There has been a lack of qualitative studies in this area to explore students' lived experiences in Science fields and to identify possible antecedents to attrition.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore Science students' intentions to persist in their studies at a Canadian institution. Sixteen Science students were interviewed; transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The results were categorized into two major themes (i.e., barriers and facilitators of persistence). Barriers to persistence included mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety and depression), program requirements (e.g., course content difficulty), priorities (e.g., lack of effort, prioritizing social gatherings), relationships (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships, and parental relationships), and lack of support from the university (e.g., academic advisors, faculty, and teaching assistants). Facilitators to persistence included academic motivation (e.g., program enjoyments, improving study habit), priorities (e.g., focusing on career aspirations), and seeking help (e.g., mental health professionals, academic advising, and university programming).