The Persistence of At-Risk Students in Higher Education

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The Persistence of At-Risk Students in Higher Education

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED

To THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Heidi J. Anderson-Isaacson

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The Persistence of At-Risk Students in Higher Education

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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Jayne K. Sommers, Ph.D., Committee Chair

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January 24, 2020
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Abstract

Institutions of higher education now receive increased scrutiny due to the rising cost of attending college in the United States and the high levels of student debt (Hill, 2016; Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017; Robb, Moody & Abdel-Ghany, 2012). Not only is the cost of higher education debatably problematic, the ability for students to graduate within four years has become increasingly difficult. This increased time in college only further contributes to the overall educational costs. Unfortunately, students identified as at-risk during the admissions process seem to bear the greatest burden because they typically require more years to graduate, lack sufficient resources, and accumulate higher levels of student debt (Gray, 2013). Students designated as at-risk at admission typically need more assistance navigating the educational and financial resources available at institutions of higher education.

This qualitative study, conducted at a small liberal arts institution in the Midwest, explored both obstacles and positive factors influencing the academic success of at-risk students. Analysis of qualitative data from first year students gathered from individual interviews with students who have completed their degrees and those who did not continue with their studies provides insights into the students’ personal motivation in conjunction with student support offered by the university and student-centered teaching approaches. The qualitative research approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of the individual stories around college completion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed me to gather data directly from participants which in turn informed identification of potential solutions to this problem.
Acknowledgements

I could not have come this far in my educational pursuits without the support of my family. Marc, my life partner and higher education professional himself, not only took on daily chores like menu planning and family organization he also took on over-load courses to help me pay for this degree. I literally could not have completed my doctorate without him. My two daughters also sacrificed time with me. Not only did they see me at my most stressful moments; they gave up entire weekends of family time to see me to this point in my educational journey. I hope, above all, that I have served as a role model to my daughters and they realize anything is possible with a lot of hard work and dedication.

I want to recognize the many powerful women who have served as influencers and role models throughout my life. To honor them, I have used their first names as the pseudonyms of my participants. Here I will share who they are and why they have been so important to me:

**Ruth Krumrey** – A strong influence in my home-town church served as my third grade Sunday school teacher and very likely the first person to light the feminist spark in me. It wasn’t until her teaching that I recognized God was not necessarily the masculine figure I had been led to believe. It was Ruth who stated, “we do not know if God is a man or a woman.” From that point forward, it bothered me deeply when someone referred to God as “he” and led to further dedication to supporting women and striving for a more equitable society.

**Janet Anderson** – My mom, the most resilient person I know … even at a time when a disease should have killed her, managed to persist and stay with us for another eight years. She taught me to work hard, have fun, and to remember there is nothing more important than having great girlfriends in your circle. It was both her strengths and her weaknesses that shaped who I am today.
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**Bernice Eidem** – My grandmother, was a woman who taught me the importance of hospitality. Not only did she prepare enough food for an army when entertaining, she always had baked goods ready to go in the freezer in case she had unexpected company. She too worked hard as a wife of a farmer and a nurse working long hours, often on her feet much of the day. Not only that, she experienced significant loss…losing her son to a car accident, her husband to a heart attack, her grandsons, one due to low birth weight and another to a car-accident and her daughter to complications from diabetes. Even though she was grieving inside, she always demonstrated strength in times of sorrow. She was our rock. The combination of a strong work-ethic with a hospitable spirit is what made this woman so special and I am glad I had her as a role model in my life.

**Elsie Schmaltz** – My neighbor lady who taught me that it is ok to break the rules once in awhile if it meant you were enjoying life! As a young child, she invited me over to coffee despite my mother’s warnings that it would stunt my growth. She would also invite me over to dinner when they were having Kraft macaroni and cheese because she knew my mom didn’t believe in cooking food that came out of a box. She taught me that age is not a factor in friendship. Although there were many decades between us, it didn’t matter when it meant enjoying great conversation over a good cup of coffee.

**Inez Anderson** – My aunt and my god-mother who taught me that nothing is more important than family. Not only was she completely invested in her own family, she often treated all of her nieces and nephews as if they were her own children. I will never forget spending nights on the farm and the ability to run down to the barn to grab the freshest milk one could possibly consume.
Martha Wallace – My college calculus teacher who first recognized I was in over my head as I transitioned to college academic life. She spent numerous hours trying to get me up to speed with my peers. After recognizing it may never happen, she worked closely with my academic advisor to develop a plan that would not only satisfy my academic and career goals but would set me up to be more academically successful.

Mary Emery – Served as my economics professor and academic advisor. She never gave up on me. She valued my grit and resilience as much as my intellectual abilities. She knew I worked hard to earn my grades and she worked hard right alongside of me to help me better understand the course content. I remember working late in the library on various accounting assignments and she always took my phone call when I needed to ask a question. She too, helped me develop an academic plan that would satisfy my personal expectations while supporting my academic success.

Patti Klein – My first higher education professional supervisor who always encouraged me to get involved in various professional development opportunities. Often, she saw things in me that I could not even see in myself. If it wasn’t for her encouragement, I clearly would not be where I am today.

Eleanor Isaacson – My teenage daughter who is wise beyond her years, always tries to “keep it real” for me often dropping life lessons right in my lap leaving me in a state of shock. She could sense my unhappiness before I was willing to admit it and she recognized when a change was needed before I was willing to accept it. My time with my daughters is too short which motivated me to keep my head down and get this dissertation done before they are off to college.

Emma Isaacson – My fiscally conservative feisty daughter who is so strong willed that it drives me crazy. I know these qualities will serve her well in the future. But what I admire so much
about Emma is her passion to do what she loves no matter what has been socially constructed as acceptable. Her strength to be the only girl on the baseball field and the comfort she has with just being herself is not something you always see in young teenage girls. I admire what you have become.

**Catherine** - Catherine represents a group of women I admire so much! Faculty and staff colleagues who belong to a running group called the Corps de Catherine have given me so much guidance and support in everything from personal to academic to professional goals. When I struggled with writing a paper on Marx or Foucault, we would often discuss it on a long rung together and by the time we were done I had a solid draft in my head. They invited me to join them during “intentional writing time” and took me to Madeline Island to seclude me from outside distractions so I could write chapter four. They also reminded me … but I didn’t often listen … that I didn’t have to get straight A’s. When faced with a bad day, it took one comment from any one of these women to remind me that “we are fabulous” and that we should never forget it! They have been my strongest cheerleaders. Our commitment has always been and always will be to lift up and support other women.

**Nancy Hegdahl** – My aunt Nancy has been important in my life but has been even more important in the lives of my daughters. My girls were only two years old when my mom passed away. I was devastated by this loss not only because I would just simply miss my mom, but because my daughters would never really know their grandmother. In her final years, she was happiest when she got to be with the girls. Nancy has stepped in to the role my mother could no longer fulfill. Inviting them over for sleep-overs, taking them on trips, to work on sewing projects and various family gatherings, she constantly reminds them how important it is to have a connection to family.
Sabrina Anderson – My work confidant of almost 17 years. We were a good team and I will never forget what we were able to accomplish together.

This doesn’t even cover my life-long friends from college, the faculty and staff that supported me through all three degrees and the many women in my neighborhood (JAGG), the ACE Club gals, my stampin’ friends and my church (Glorious Women). Mom, I have so many strong women in my circle…thanks for demonstrating the importance of strong female relationships!

Although my focus of my acknowledgments have centered on the strong women in my life, I also need to recognize my dad. While in the editing process, I have been engaged professionally that requires a lot of driving. In addition, my father has been struggling with some significant health issues. While driving I reflected on the process of writing this dissertation. At one time, I thought it was my retention work at the site of this study that inspired my dissertation topic, but after serious reflection, I realized the information shared in this paper models what I learned from my dad in his role as a high school agriculture teacher. I will admit, he was not the best classroom teacher, often modeling what I recommend discontinuing. It was his hands-on approach with his students in their own environment – their farms – where he shone as a teacher and they excelled as students. The classroom was not limited to 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. for my dad. The part he really enjoyed was walking through their barns and their fields after school and on the weekends … this is where the real learning happened; not only for the students, but for my dad. He helped his students solve problems and he celebrated their successes. As Dr. Bongila argued in our ethics class, it is difficult to change your habits. Even though you may work hard to change things learned throughout your life, a person often falls back on learned habits. Well, this is one habit that I am glad has remained a central part of my life.
Finally, I need to thank my advisor Dr. Jayne Sommers and my committee members Dr. Buffy Smith and Dr. Jean P. Bongila. Each have contributed so much to my learning and growth as a scholar and as a professional. The guidance and advice they have shared with me throughout this process was so valuable and I will be forever grateful for their support.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Imagine: a student considered to be a high achiever at her high school goes to college with a high level of confidence that she can earn a college degree, only to find herself in a classroom where what seems like familiar content to her peers, resembles a foreign language to her. Quickly, the reality of attending an under-resourced rural community K-12 school sets in and the student’s confidence wanes. Too afraid to admit she may not belong at this prestigious liberal arts college, she does not seek help until almost too late. A product of first-generation parents herself, educational expectations were high and not attending college was not an option. The pressure of her parents’ expectations forced her to seek the help she needed to make a challenging, yet successful transition to college. The college student described above was me.

Now, imagine the same situation, but the student in question does not have the support of their parents. In fact, this student’s parents thought attending college was a waste of time and money. The student’s parents did not attend college and managed to provide for their family. As a student of color, this student pursues higher education without the financial or emotional support of their parents. Once in the classroom, they do not see themselves in their instructors and struggle to find mentors or role models who demonstrate that they too can pursue the American dream of obtaining a college education. Not feeling supported can result in a different, less successful outcome for this student, an outcome all too common for at-risk students (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Nathan (2017), a high school principal of an inner-city arts school known for the academic achievements of its very diverse student body, found that low-income, racially diverse alumni did not have difficulty gaining acceptance to college, but finishing was another story. The narratives of the students in Nathan’s (2017) book highlighted the obstacles faced by first-generation, low-income, lower-class, diverse students which
prohibited them from finishing their college degrees. Rendon (2009) reflected on the college experience and shared, “most of my predominantly White college faculty had no idea who I was, what my culture was like, and what I had struggled with to even have an opportunity to enter the doors of college life” (p. 3). This experience is all too common for under-represented groups and at-risk students.

My study concerns the experience of at-risk undergraduate college students and their attrition and “time to degree” completion rates. Smith (2013) defines at-risk students as those who are “low-income, first-generation, demonstrate poor academic performance, and have other factors that put students at danger of failing in school” (p. 3). For nearly 17 years, I served as director of residence life at a small private university. During “move in” day, many eager students arrived on campus with their suitcases and a dream, the goal of earning a college diploma. Unfortunately, many at-risk students like those described above, face obstacles that keep them from earning the college degree they hoped to receive. Some of the students the university identifies as at-risk can receive additional support in their transition to college by living in a Living-Learning Community called Emerging Scholars, designed to provide essential transitional support. Although these students do well in their first year with this additional support, their degree completion rates are still not at the desired level of university officials (Retention and Completion Advisory Council, personal communication, October, 2013). My study seeks to clarify the support and resources needed by at-risk students to not only successfully transition to college, but to also persist to completion of their college degrees.

In the sections that follow, I outline the problem, share why this research is important and discuss how this study aids institutions in providing the support at-risk students need to be academically successful. I also outline the research questions under exploration and provide
definitions of terms to aid the reader not familiar with common terms found in scholarly work focused on higher education.

**Problem Statement, Purpose of the Study and Significance of the Study**

As the cost of attending college in the United States gains increased scrutiny from within and outside higher education, college administrators, students, and their families struggle with dismal four-, five-, and six-year time to degree graduation rates (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Gray, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). It has become increasingly difficult for students to graduate in four years. Parents and students weigh the time to degree completion rates as one factor in their decision when applying to a college (American Academy of Arts and Sciences [AAAS], 2017). When choosing a college, students and parents evaluate the effect of delayed graduation rates on the true cost of college (Astin, 2005). Unfortunately, some students, and more often those defined as at-risk for various reasons, leave college without a degree and with significant debt (Executive Office of the President, 2014; Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017; Robb, Moody & Abdel-Ghany, 2012). The attrition rates of at-risk students demand attention.

**Problem Statement**

The competition for a smaller number of high school graduates in addition to the skepticism about ACT and SAT scores as predictors of success, broaden the opportunity for access to higher education for students who may not have been considered by many institutions in the past (Abdul-Alim, 2016; Syverson, Franks, & Hiss, 2018). Even as high school enrollment declines, the number of students completing a high school degree is increasing. According to a White House report, “in 1970, roughly three-fourths of the middle class had a high school diploma or less; by 2007, this share had declined to just 39 percent” (Executive
Office of the President, 2014, p.2). According to AAAS (2017), “almost 90 percent of high school graduates can expect to enroll in an undergraduate institution at some point during their young adulthood” (p. 1). These statistics demonstrate that the demographic of students completing their high school degree is shifting from middle class students to a more diverse student population and these students are successfully enrolling in higher education. Unfortunately, the graduation rates of some students entering college are not as optimistic as “college access and attainment remains unequal” (Executive Office of the President, 2014). The changing demographic of students attending college, in addition to the increasing number of students classified as at-risk, require institutions to change the level of support offered as students transition from high school to college. The AAAS (2017) found:

although under-graduate student enrollment grew dramatically over the past several decades and is increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, including students of all ages and backgrounds, many continue to face significant barriers to the pursuit of a college credential. (p. 46)

Many of these students are identified as at-risk by admissions committees through the admission process. Unfortunately, at-risk students do not persist and graduate from college at the same rate as mainstream students (Bir & Myrick, 2015).

Students with predictably low graduation rates tend to be first-generation college students (Cardoza, 2016; Collier & Morgan, 2008), from rural or inner-city areas (National Student Clearing House Research Center (NSCHRC), 2016; University of Georgia, 2017), low-income (Marcus, 2018; Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017; Pfeffer, 2018; NSCHRC, 2016), students of color (Bir & Myrick, 2015; NSCHRC, 2016), students with low high school GPAs (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Kuh et al., 2008) students with low ACT test scores (Kuh et al., 2008),
and/or students lacking preparation for academic rigor (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Many at-risk students have more than one of the above characteristics, making it even more difficult for them to complete their college degree. Nonetheless, at-risk students make their way to college campuses and need greater support from college personnel. Because “education plays a role in promoting equal rights at the individual and community levels,” administrators and faculty need to develop greater support for at-risk students (Dejaeghere, 2008, p. 357). Additional support is vital to increase the chances an at-risk student will earn a college degree.

Gray (2013) found colleges and universities failed to graduate low-income students and students of color at the same rate as the rest of the general traditional student population. While the “six-year graduation rate for undergraduate institutions hovers around 53%” overall, the graduation rate for low-income and students of color is significantly lower (Nathan, 2017, p. 11). According to Gray’s (2013) research, only 47% of Black women, 36% of Black men and 56% of first-generation students earn their bachelor’s degrees after six years. Students who do not obtain a college degree may accumulate significant debt with nothing to show for it. Gray (2013) argued declining financial support from the government to colleges and universities has driven the decision to increase tuition costs for all students. Universities looking to increase enrollment may admit students who have not found their way to college campuses in the past. The combination of lower income students accessing college along with the decreased financial support for both the institution and the student (Executive Office of the President, 2014) creates a social justice issue that higher education administrators need to address. Educational institutions either need to stop accepting students who are not likely to persist or provide these students with the support and resources they need to be academically successful in college.
A significant amount of research concerns how at-risk students gain access to college (Bir, & Myrick, 2015; Heaney & Fischer, 2011). Although more students are going to college, the persistence to graduation is dismal, particularly for at-risk students. As the AAAS (2017) reports, “Nearly 90 percent of high school graduates enroll in college classes during their early adulthood; an unacceptably small percentage complete the education they start” (p. 26). About 60% of those who begin a bachelor’s degree and 30% who pursue a certificate or associate degree complete their degrees (AAAS, 2017). In 2012, 59.2% of students who began their education at four-year postsecondary institutions graduated within six years (ACT, 2018). Asian Pacific Islander students graduated at the highest rates at 70.6%, followed by mixed race students at 65.2% and White students at 63.2%. Hispanic students followed with graduation rates at 53.5%. American Indian students graduated at a rate of 41% and Black students at 40.9% (AAAS, 2017, p. 29). Bir and Myrick (2015) described similar trends in achievement and completion rates which are addressed later in this study. This study sought to clarify what is necessary to keep students in college to graduation. If educators do not take seriously the opportunity given to them to support students to graduation, who else can have a greater influence on the future of these students than those charged with supporting their success?

One hypothesis suggests that if educators support students with “hope, structure, skilled coaching, fast feedback and then provide a gradual release” (S. J. Noonan, personal communication, May 9, 2018), at-risk students will find academic success. Although many institutions of higher education have implemented programmatic interventions to provide this type of support, at-risk students continue to experience low college retention and graduation rates (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Unfortunately, the data demonstrate that this hypothesis alone in fact
does not explain success and more exploration is necessary to identify support systems needed to help at-risk students persist to graduations.

**Purpose of the Study**

My study aimed to analyze the experiences of at-risk undergraduate college students at one Midwest university. Through analysis of qualitative data directly from the students, I outline what at-risk students identify as integral to ensuring their persistence to graduation. I investigated student experiences from the perspective of identified at-risk students who did persist to graduation and at-risk students who did not persist to graduation (referred to here as “non-persisting” students).

To support at-risk students, some higher education institutions have implemented “bridge programs” or special support programs to facilitate the successful transition of this population of students to college (Bir & Myrick, 2015). The goals of such programs often include increased student retention and improved grade point averages (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Although at-risk students often do well in the first year when fully supported by these programs, the persistence rate to graduation remains dismal (Gray, 2013). Research to address this problem is needed to improve the graduation rates of students entering college. The same proved true with a program developed at the site of this study.

**Significance of the Study**

A study that examines the results of the implementation of strategic and systemic interventions for students designated as at-risk is critical for today’s college and universities to address the low four-, five- and six-year graduation rates. Pausing to address the many issues faced by at-risk students may benefit the larger community of higher education. First, improving graduation rates of at-risk students identified as the least likely to persist improves the overall
Persistence of At-Risk Students

four-, five- and six-year graduation rates of academic institutions. In addition, this adds to the marketability factors important to parents and prospective students.

Second, the data demonstrate the importance of adding support systems and curricular reform needed to support the changing demographics of students making their way to college campuses across the United States. A report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences confirms that faculty training, support for tenured faculty and curriculum reform are necessary to support student learning and college completion (Flaherty, 2017). Attention to the retention and graduation rate data reinforces the need for change to honor the commitment institutions make to a student upon acceptance. Ensuring students receive the support needed to earn their diploma in a timely manner, while acquiring as little debt as possible, may meet the goals of both the student and institution.

Third, a more diverse society requires a more diverse work force to better meet the needs of our changing population. A comprehensive study may illustrate the need for systemic change at the university level, such as curriculum reform, to meet the needs of a diverse student population and changes in student experience and programing. As campuses continue to become more diverse, colleges and universities need to analyze their traditional approach to teaching and learning. Faculty need to abandon the traditional approaches to teaching often consumed by a wealthier and elite student population and shift their paradigm to better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017) suggested that “by 2040, there will be no racial or ethnic majority in the United States” (p. 76). As a result, faculty will encounter pressure to deliver their curriculum in a way that better meets the needs of this changing demographic. So often, realization of needed change occurs, but the support or courage to make the change does not exist. I developed the following research
questions to guide this study in identifying what students need to successfully graduate from college.

**Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What do at-risk students identify as the support systems that most contributed to their persistence through graduation from college?
2. What do at-risk students identify as obstacles to completing their degrees?
3. What do at-risk students identify as systematic university changes that need to be implemented to support their persistence through college?

I answered these questions through the analysis of qualitative data collected from individual interviews with at-risk students at one Midwestern liberal arts university admitted into the university’s Learning Enrichment and Advising Program (LEAP), a program specifically designed to support students as they transition to college.

According to the AAAS (2017), “more research needs to be done on evaluating the efficacy of completion initiatives. There is little understanding of why some underserved populations respond positively to completion initiatives while others continue to struggle” (p. 86). Finally, student voices need to be lifted and heard in the process of coming up with solutions that may improve their persistence through college. Often, educators think they have all the answers, but with the changing demographic of student bodies, all higher education professionals need to take the time to hear from those that they serve. The next section will offer a list of definitions of terms utilized in this study.
**Definition of Terms**

**At-Risk Students:** For this study, at-risk students are students demonstrating poor academic high school performance in combination with the status of low-income, first-generation, student of color, and/or a student who faced a significant life event.

**Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID):** A college readiness program designed to prepare high school students for college (Pannoni, 2015).

**College Possible:** A program which partners with colleges and universities to provide support to low-income students (College Possible, n.d.).

**Cultural capital:** The collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class (Bourdieu, 1986).

**Culturally Competent:** A set of behaviors, policies, and attitudes which form a system or agency which allows cross-cultural groups to effectively work professionally in situations. This includes human behaviors, languages, communications, actions, values, religious beliefs, social groups, and ethic perceptions. Individuals are competent to function on their own and within an organization where multi-cultural situations will be present (Business Dictionary, 2020).

**Emerging Scholars (ES):** A residential Living-Learning Community designated to provide additional support to students conditionally admitted to the Learning Enrichment and Advising Program (LEAP) who also live on campus.

**First-generation:** A student whose parents or legal guardians have not obtained a bachelor’s degree. They are the first in their family to attend a four-year institution (Collier & Morgan, 2004).
**Hidden Curriculum**: A set of implicit rules pertaining to the norms, values, and expectations that unofficially govern how people interact with and evaluate one another (Smith, 2013).

**LEAP Program**: The Learning Enrichment and Advising Program established as a support system for all conditionally admitted students to the university in this study.

**Persistence/persistence rate**: Most universities measure their persistence rate by retention of first-year students to their second year (NSCRC, 2016). “Persistence” as used in this research refers to persistence from the first year of college through graduation.

**Pell Grant**: Federal Pell Grants are usually awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's or a professional degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

**PLUS Loans**: Federal loans that graduate or professional students and parents of dependent undergraduate students can use to help pay for college or career school (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

**Social justice**: Social justice refers to a concept in which equity or justice is achieved in every aspect of society rather than in only some aspects or for some people (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007). A world organized around social justice principles affords individuals and groups fair treatment as well as an impartial share or distribution of the advantages and disadvantages within a society.

**Social capital**: Sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu as cited in Szeman & Kaposy, 2010).
Summer bridge programs: An early form of intervention for at-risk students consisting of intensive academic and residential experiences that are meant to strengthen the academic foundation students bring to college (Bir & Myrick, 2015)

Federal Trio Programs (TRIO): A middle school through prost baccalaureate program designed to identify and provide support for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Under-represented group: Underrepresented refers to racial and ethnic populations who are represented disproportionately in higher education. Historically means that this is a ten year or longer trend at a given institution (Sierra College, 2018).

Upward Bound: Provides pre-college support for first-generation and low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

The terms provided in this section will be useful in understanding common language utilized in higher education. Many of the terms found in this section will be used in the review of relevant literature, the next section in this study.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter examines the content literature relevant to the common factors affecting the acceptance and persistence of at-risk students in higher education. Although this study does inform the persistence of students in higher education, I also address the broader perspective of acceptance and persistence of at-risk students in higher education to inform and explore factors and characteristics of students who may or may not be successful in college. An understanding of the factors influencing an at-risk student’s ability to access higher education and the effect of these factors on the long-term success of an at-risk college student can contribute to the development of programs and services designed to support student persistence in college. I used primary key search terms, including at-risk, conditional admit, higher education, race, persistence, low-income, college student, retention rates, hidden curriculum, first-generation, and achievement gap to locate relevant literature for this study. I then began organizing the literature into sections relevant to this study.

After sharing the historical context of at-risk students in higher education, I organized the literature review into four major sections which include characteristics of at-risk students, pre-college factors that inhibit at-risk student persistence, programmatic interventions that increase at-risk student persistence, and analytical theory. Included in the characteristics of at-risk students section are three subsections: low socioeconomic status, first-generation students and students of color. The pre-college factors that inhibit at-risk student persistence section includes two subsections: K-12 resources and poor academic performance. I then briefly share information about bridge programs, Living-Learning communities, and mentorship programs, popular programmatic interventions implemented by colleges and universities to increase at-risk student persistence. Finally, I discuss the analytical theories that frames this research which
includes engaged pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and sentipensante pedagogy. The largest theme in the literature concerns the effect of poor academic performance prior to admission to college on students’ retention and graduation rates.

**Historical Context of At-Risk Students in Higher Education**

New England Settlers, many of whom attended universities such as Cambridge and Oxford, valued higher education and believed clergy and civil leaders needed a college degree. As a result, Harvard College was founded in 1636 to educate White men (Thelin, Edwards & Moyen, 2019). Thelin et al. (2019) state “women and African Americans were denied participation by statute and custom, but colleges did serve Native Americans in a missionary capacity” (para. 6). Higher education was designed to serve a very specific population without consideration for racial, class, or gender diversity.

Today, higher education is known “as a means to legitimacy, literacy, and respectability” (Thelin et. al, 2019, para. 38) and now serves a more diverse student body pursuing a wide variety of fields of study. Yet, universities still struggle with “questions of equality and access” (Thelin et. al, 2019, para. 38). The growth of constituent diverse institutions allowed colleges and universities to uniquely serve “student groups that have been traditionally underserved by the majority of postsecondary institutions” (Thelin et. al., 2019, para. 50). Historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, Tribal colleges and women only institutions uniquely serve these historically under-represented populations. Unfortunately, they serve a proportionately small percentage of the student population and higher education largely remains stratified (Thelin et. al., 2019). Although higher education has made progress in providing access to various colleges and universities for diverse student populations, work remains to properly support students from college entrance to graduation.
Characteristics of At-Risk Students in the United States

Although each student experience is unique with a variety of characteristics that influence student persistence in college, low socioeconomic status, first-generation status, and race rise to the top as concerns for many at-risk students. Research indicates there is a strong parallel between socioeconomic status and college degree completion (Nadworny, 2018). Students coming from low-income schools and low-income families often come from urban and rural school districts and are less likely to remain in college than students who have ample K-12 educational resources (Nadworny, 2018). The lack of resources for inner city, urban schools have historically received a lot of attention, but since the 2016 presidential election, students from rural communities have received more attention and some have been deemed the newest under-represented group (Nadworny, 2018). A report conducted by the University of Georgia (2017) supports this claim and shared that rural students are “difficult to find, harder to enroll, but offer a perspective that moved to the forefront of the last presidential campaign” (p. 37). In addition, students who live in rural areas “face severe economic and educational challenges” (University of Georgia, 2017, p. 37). Some colleges and universities have started “to recognize that these students need at least as much help navigating the college experience as low-income, first-generation racial and ethnic minorities from inner cities (Nadworny, 2018, para. 6). As a product of a rural school district, I am uniquely aware of the challenges I faced as I transitioned to college. Leaders and educators need to address this disparity to ensure equitable resources for all K-12 students. Despite the new attention given to rural students, further exploration of the impact of race and first-generation status remains a priority which I will address in depth in this study. The characteristic many rural students and students from urban inner-city school districts have in common is low socioeconomic status, addressed in the next section of the literature review.
Low Socioeconomic Status

Although many factors contribute to student success, poverty is likely the biggest factor affecting school test scores (Raghavendran, 2017). Research highlights this, particularly in K-12 education, and ultimately shows poverty has an impact on students in college (NSCRC, 2016). A recent White House report stated, “low income students face barriers to college success at every stage of the education pipeline from elementary school through post-secondary education, sometimes in spite of their academic achievements” (Executive Office of the President, 2014, p. 14). The same report shared that with all other student characteristics (GPA, SAT, and ACT) equal, students from a “high socioeconomic status are 11 percentage points more likely to graduate within six years than low socioeconomic status (Executive Office of the President, 2014, p. 14). Due to the change in policies in the public funding of higher education, the burden of paying for college has shifted from the public to the individual student (Hu & St. John, 2001; Leonhardt, 2018), which is particularly challenging for low-income students trying to obtain a college degree. “The tightening of the lending criteria for PLUS loans has caused a sharp drop in enrollment at historically black colleges. In 2012, the Education Department rejected the PLUS loan applications of 14,616 students going to historically black colleges” (Hannah-Jones, 2015, p. 36). This staggering statistic not only demonstrates the challenge of funding education, but it also directly influences the ability to educate and diversify the global workforce. These policies adversely affect “Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, whose poverty rates are two to three times that of Whites” (Carlson, 2016). Lending policies are just another obstacle under-represented groups and low-income students need to overcome to successfully graduate from college. As Smith (2013) argued,

Only 19% of young people (20 to 29-years old) who come from families with incomes below $25,000 earn an associate degree or higher. On the other hand, 76% of young
people who come from families with incomes of $76,000 or more graduate with at least a community college degree (p. 3).

While working with students from low-income groups, I observe them worrying about paying for college, resulting in an unrealistic amount of time working to earn money and searching for funding options to pay tuition. This is even more true for minority students who are hesitant to take out loans as “research also indicates that minority students are more sensitive to prices and less willing to use educational loans” (Hu & St. John, 2001, p. 266). As an instructor for a group of students in the LEAP program, I observe students from underrepresented groups who sacrifice time on school work for time working two and three jobs. The need to have multiple jobs could be a cultural consideration as “Black, Latino and American Indian students tend to borrow considerably less than White or Asian Pacific-Americans” (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Peterson, & Allen, 1999, p. 76). The reality is, if they cannot earn enough money to pay for college, they will not be able to remain in college.

If the United States can find a systemic solution to the affordability of college for those that can least afford it, we may be able to fix this problem. Hu and St. John (2001) found that “African American students who received financial aid in the form of grants only were nine percentage points more likely to persist than otherwise average non-recipients” (p. 269). Hu and St. John also found that “Low-income students were less likely to persist compared to students who did not report family income” (p. 272). Students least likely to report family income typically come from families who know that they are from a high enough income bracket which is typically “over $350,000 per year, have more than $1M in reportable assets, and have only one child in college” (Edvisors, 2020, para. 10) that financial aid will not be granted. This data
illustrates how the combination of race and financial assistance can positively influence the persistence of White students over African Americans.

A student’s financial situation not only influences persistence, it also affects a student’s ability to be academically successful. Hu and St. John (2001) also found that positive academic performance correlated with higher income students; therefore “student aid plays an important role in equalizing opportunity,” (p. 283) which requires higher education to pay close attention to aid delivery to those who are considered at-risk. Low-income students who do not receive enough aid to pay for their education often must work more hours to cover their higher education costs, which can distract them from their academic endeavors. In addition, low-income levels do not correlate with low intelligence levels. In fact, Gray (2013) found, “low-income students finish college less often than their affluent peers, even when they outscore them on skills tests” (p. 1246). This indicates the need for removal of other barriers or for the implementation of additional support systems to ensure persistence to graduation.

Over the last 25 years funding cuts and tuition increases have shifted the cost of higher education from states to students, disproportionately affecting low-income students (Mitchell, Leachman & Masterson, 2017). If a student is “first-generation and low-income, they are more likely to work either a part time or full-time job in addition to their college studies” (Kindelan, 2018, para. 32). Students who are unable to receive the aid they need to remain in college often need to work significant hours, which distracts them from fully focusing on their studies and from campus engagement activities. If students are only able to devote half the time or less than your peers to your studies, it’s more likely that students will have trouble keeping up with the coursework and more likely that they might have trouble graduating (Kindelan, 2018). The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017) argued, “the more actively students engage with
their peers, with faculty and staff and with their academic programs, the more likely they are to progress, persist, and complete” (p. 38). Unfortunately, if these students do not work to pay down their student debt, they are unable to remain in college. Not only do they sacrifice campus engagement to work, they often sacrifice their grades at the expense of a paycheck to ensure they can at least stay enrolled in college. This catches up to students, and they find themselves no longer able to continue this pattern of balancing work and education because the bills become so insurmountable and the impact on their grades is too significant, leading to frozen registrations, probation, or suspension from their chosen college or university. “The students who struggle most with student debt are not those who borrow the most, but those who do not complete their programs. The central issue is whether students complete credentials of value” (AAAS, 2017, p. 57). The financial burden of a college degree contributes to the low completion levels of students trying to obtain their degrees. Unfortunately, the financial burden is heavier for those who start and stop college due to lack of sufficient funds. Not only have they invested in some college courses, and incurred the debt from those courses, but they also now do not have the degree necessary to get the jobs that will allow them to pay off the debt they have accumulated. It is imperative that institutions of higher education support students through graduation to ensure they receive a return on their investment, pay back their debt, and decrease loan default rates. Students who graduate, even from the most expensive colleges and universities, have the lowest default rates among all individuals who enroll in college (AAAS, 2017). This fact illustrates how effective college completion is on ensuring the employability and earning potential of students, so they can pay off their student loans.

Subsidizing student debt is not an unrealistic solution to ensuring students can afford a college education. Moody’s Analytics (2017) advised that substantial investments in financing
higher education would not only result in improved college completion rates, but also grow the U.S. economy (Flaherty, 2017). A report produced by the American Academy of Arts and sciences suggests “the Pell Grant system should provide grants that support students completing 30 credits at any time throughout the course of a calendar year” (Flaherty, 2017). Creative thinking is necessary to simultaneously allow students to work a bit less and focus a bit more on their academics to ensure a timely graduation rate. Investing in higher education would not only support the student, but also the economy and workforce. Rewarding students financially for credit completion, as Pell Grant officials suggest, is just one solution supporting this outcome for at-risk students (Flaherty, 2017). Many students who struggle to pay for college are also first-generation college students which I will address in the next section of my literature review.

**First-Generation Status**

First-generation status student support is gaining significant traction in higher education. Educators recognize the need for a new and different type of support and a clear understanding of faculty expectations are required to ensure a smooth transition to college for first-generation status students (Collier, & Morgan, 2004; Smith, 2013). Many first-generation status students also struggle with affording their college tuition and fees. As Cardoza (2016) stated,

> Even when students manage to cobble together scholarships, loans or gifts from relatives or churches, once they actually get into college, they typically find they have a whole new set of unanticipated barriers: academics, social and cultural, as well as their own self-doubt. (para. 4)

This is especially true for first-generation students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “nearly 50 percent of U.S. college students are considered first-generation” (Oo, 2017, p. 15). While access to education is becoming more readily available for these students, and educators are gaining an understanding of the differing needs of these students,
universities are not prepared to offer support systems and provide additional resources to first-generation students. Colleges and universities have become accustomed to students having some sort of cultural or social capital within their circle of friends and family members who had college experience to help them navigate their transition to college, particularly relating to the distinct differences between a high school and college education. This is often not the case for first-generation students and as a result, they are “at a higher risk of dropping out if their parents don’t hold at least a bachelor’s degree” (Oo, 2017, p. 15). Collier and Morgan (2004) and the Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning (2018) support this claim. In response to this deficit, many colleges and universities are developing programmatic interventions to ease their transition to college which is addressed in the section on programmatic interventions that increase at-risk student persistence. In addition to first-generation status, their race often creates further obstacles for students to navigate the educational system effectively.

**Race**

Over the past 45 years, since affirmative action was initiated in the United States, higher education experienced a slow and steady increase in the numbers of students of color enrolling for post-secondary degrees (Hurtado et al., 1999; Mitchell et al., 2017; Spring, 2016). Although the recent increase in the cost of higher education has slowed the growing numbers of students of color enrolling in college, the percentages vary from racial and ethnic groups with some enrolling at larger numbers than others (Mitchell et al., 2017). Several factors and characteristics such as financial concerns, family support, family obligations, academic preparedness, first-generation status, role models, and mentors all influence a student’s retention and success in college. If a student is both first-generation and a student of color, the concerns of persisting to graduation are even more concerning. As Cardoza (2010) pointed out, “nearly one-third of students entering … colleges in the United States are first-generation. These students are also
more likely to be minorities, and they are far less likely to graduate” (para. 6). According to the Digest of Educational Statistics (2016), “White students earned 67 percent of all bachelor’s degrees awarded, Black Students 11 percent, Hispanic students earned 12 percent and Asian/Pacific Islander students earned about 7 percent” (p. 4). This evidence requires a systemic approach to addressing the issues faced by both first-generation students and students of color.

Just getting to college can be a significant challenge for many under-represented students, particularly students of color. Hu and St. John (2001) found “a relatively large gap in college grades across racial/ethnic groups. The gap in student college grades would in part explain the differentials in aggregate persistence rates among student from different groups” (p. 282). In addition, many of these students have family responsibilities ranging from translating for their parents who do not speak English to obtaining a job to support the family (Guo, 2014). The socioeconomic status for many students of color compound the obstacles faced by these students.

Societal factors have attributed to the lack of persistence of students of color. The “lack of role models, school processes, peer influences and opportunity differentials” are all examples of other societal factors (Washington & Newman, 1991, p. 29). Bir and Myrick (2015) support the societal factors attributed to the lack of persistence of students of color. The differences in student opinion on the level of diversity and cultural competency of the community can be staggeringly different. According to a meta-analysis conducted by Hurtado et al. (1999), “one study found that 68 percent of white students thought their university was generally supportive of minority students, while only 28 percent of the African American and Chicano students thought so” (p. 37). Universities need to be keenly aware of the differences in perceptions and actively work to create supportive environments. In a longitudinal study of Latino students, a variety of four-year institutions found:
although reports of overt instances of personal harassment or discrimination did not significantly affect academic and personal-emotional adjustment, these overt acts tended to diminish the Latino students’ feeling of attachment with the institution (Hurtado et al., 1999, p. 38).

Universities need to invest time and energy into creating educational environments that support the diverse needs of the students now attending institutions of higher education.

The concern goes beyond Latino and Black students. Another report on the experiences of Native American students “confirmed that perceptions of racial hostility were strongly associated with feelings of isolation, but the effect on attitude toward college or grade point average was not decisively significant,” which indicates a desire to complete college despite the racial tension (Hurtado et al., 1999, p. 38). Clearly, a disconnect exists between the perceptions of White students and the level of support provided to students of color and the lived experience of those students of color. As Shedd (2015) highlighted, “in our human desire to feel safe in our surroundings, and confident that we can protect our loved ones, we can all too easily become suspicious of anyone who does not look or talk or walk like us” (p. 9). If students do not see themselves in their peers and their educators, they can encounter a compromise to their sense of safety and their ability to learn and connect. The next section will illustrate factors that influence the persistence of at-risk students, experiences that start long before college, but have a lasting impact which influences college success.

**Pre-College Factors that Inhibit At-Risk Student Persistence**

The educational preparedness of students is significantly influenced by their K-12 experience. The academic resources available to some K-12 students are insufficient, leaving students unprepared for many college courses. Knowledge of the need for academic rigor in high school in combination with the lack of resources in schools can be a contributing factor to
poor test scores. This is particularly true for some urban and rural school districts whose communities cannot afford to support their local schools. In the next sections of this literature review I examine extant scholarship related to how a students’ K-12 experience and poor academic performance influences the ability for at-risk students to persist to graduation from college.

**K-12 Experience**

Whether a student travels through their K-12 experience in an urban, rural, or suburban school district can influence a student’s ability to receive a quality education (Shedd, 2015). Shedd illustrated the differences in the resources and learning environments available to students all living in the same city of Chicago. The differences were significant for individuals living in a wealthier portion of the city versus a low-income area of the city. When comparing five different schools, Shedd (2015) found “while 77 percent of students from suburban schools met the Illinois math standards, only 1 percent meet the standards in the city schools” (p. 2). K-12 schools are the institutions that form the lives of students and the students “understand a great deal about their value, both the value they assign to themselves and the value they believe others see in them, by examining the state of their surroundings” (Shedd, 2015, p. 34). Where a student lives influences their ability to receive a quality K-12 education. The K-12 experience is the foundation of a students’ education and essential to not only access a college education but also to earn a college degree. Students who are not college-ready face significant obstacles in achieving their academic goals.

Unfortunately, at-risk students often come from communities affected by poverty (Nathan, 2017). Poorer communities are often unable to contribute to or support their area K-12 schools. Consequently, insufficient resources result in “less prepared teachers and fewer college preparation courses” (Chang, Witt-Sandis, & Hakuta, 1999, p. 13). Rural and inner-city schools
do not always have a diversity of income levels in their communities to ensure the local schools have the resources they need to best prepare their students, particularly for college. Thus, many students from these areas are underprepared for the academic rigor required to persist to college graduation. Unfortunately, housing policies of the past with systemically racist regulations, resulted in racial segregation. Students from inner-city schools in poverty are “almost exclusively Black, Hispanic or Native American” (Chang et al., 1999, p. 13), which contributes to the persistence rates of under-represented groups in higher education. While data on the persistence of under-represented groups are readily available, rural students are gaining attention as another form of under-represented group (Nadworny, 2018). The K-12 experience ultimately influences the academic performance of all student groups, but especially for under-represented groups. The next section will illustrate how poor academic performance prior to college can influence a student’s ability to be successful in college.

**Poor Academic Performance**

An industry standard within higher education involves measuring a students’ academic merit by test scores (Astin, 2005). Some institutions are beginning to re-evaluate this practice as more data demonstrates standardized tests are not always a good predictor of success, specifically for students of color (Syverson, et al., 2018). Rendon (2009), an educator who promotes a more transformative teaching style, warned against using standardized tests to measure a student’s intelligence because such tests are likely culturally biased and they “only measure certain forms of intelligence, primarily verbal and logical-mathematical” (p. 38). Syverson et al. (2018) found that when given an option, students from under-represented groups were more likely not to submit test scores when applying to college, and although first semester grades were lower for non-submitters, these students graduated at equivalent or slightly higher rates than their peers. Opponents of standardized tests say that the ability to succeed in college is
a combination of “ability, talent and motivation” (Chang et al., 1999, p. 14), factors not easily measurable based on test scores alone. Rendon (2009) added that there are multiple forms of intelligence and the system of merit only recognizes those that are easily measurable. Unfortunately, many students are left behind in the educational process. Consequently,

Students whose parents didn’t go to college … are less likely to have had access to the type of challenging high school classes that increase the chance of success and are less likely to have confidence in their academic abilities. (Cardoza, 2016, para. 8)

This claim is supported by Rendon (2009) who encourages educators to break this cycle of access to resources for students who may be the first in their families to pursue higher education. Unfortunately, standardized tests put a label on students and often label those who do poorly on as poor academic performers.

Institutions that recognize that some students simply need additional support with their transition to college, have put in place programmatic interventions to aid in the success of students identified as at-risk at the point of admission. Outlined in the next section are short descriptions of bridge programs, Living-Learning communities and peer mentor programs, all common programmatic efforts institutions implement to assist with focused student support.

**Programmatic Interventions that Increase At-Risk Student Persistence**

Many colleges and universities recognize that at-risk students need additional support with their transition to college. In response to this identified need, institutions have established programmatic interventions such as bridge programs, Living-Learning communities and peer mentor programs. I outline in this section the unique differences between each of these programmatic interventions designed to provide essential student support as students transition to college.
Bridge Programs

Bridge programs created for at-risk students typically occur the month prior to their first semester in college and involve additional programing, foundational coursework, and are aimed at improving student preparation for college as well as provide different types of social support (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Students who participate in bridge programs persist at higher rates and tend to have higher GPAs than the at-risk students who do not participate in such programs (Bir & Myrick, 2015). One study conducted at a historically Black college found that although participating students persisted at higher rates throughout their college career, retention dropped off over time after finding significant success in year-one (85%) and year-two (61%) retention rates. Unfortunately, graduation rates were 21% in year four, 32% in year five and 40% in year six. The data demonstrate that support systems are necessary for all at-risk students and these support systems should continue long past the first year of a student’s college experience.

Whether students attend a two or four-year institutions, at-risk students appear to need a different level of organized and intentional long-term support to ensure their persistence through college (AAAS, 2015). However, despite the programmatic interventions such as bridge programs, low-retention and graduation rates remain among at-risk post-secondary students (Bir & Myrick, 2015). The initial success of bridge programs warrants a long-term look at a solution that will sustain its success past the first year of college, which could be programs like Living-Learning communities.

Living-Learning Communities/Programs (LLCs)

Living-Learning communities, considered a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), are specialized residential programs that typically have direct connections with a specific academic program and residence life staff (National Study of Living-Learning Programs, 2007). Living-Learning communities create both in and out-of-classroom learning opportunities for students to
engage and create deeper relationships with faculty, staff and peers associated with the community (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Faculty often maintain office hours in the residence halls, occasionally teach classes in the building and programs take on the theme or major. In addition to the targeted support, guidance, and opportunities LLCs offer resident students, research suggests that participants are more likely to have higher GPAs, higher retention rates and higher satisfaction with the university (National Study of Living-Learning Programs, 2007). LLCs established to provide student support as students transition to college can be a viable option of long-term support as students progress through their college careers. This is dependent on the opportunities available throughout a student’s entire educational experience. In addition to transitional support, mentor programs also offer a source of support for students as they transition to college and beyond. Both peer mentors and faculty mentors are key to supporting students as they navigate their higher education experience, which I will demonstrate in the next section of the literature review.

**Mentor Programs**

In response to the obstacles many at-risk students face as they transition to college, many institutions have started mentoring programs, particularly predominately White institutions trying to serve first-generation students and other under-represented groups (Smith, 2013). Smith argued that creating mentoring programs for these students is vital to ensure their success and encouraged institutions to view these students with a high potential for success rather than looking at them as likely to fail. “Mentoring students once in college can increase persistence and completion. One-on-one college coaching has proven to increase college graduation rates by 4 percentage points” (Executive Office of the President, 2014, p. 5). Smith (2013) also stated, “the fact that these students have enrolled in college despite their past family, social, economic, and academic challenges is a testimony to their resiliency and persistence to achieve academic
success.” (p. 3). Their resiliency should fuel our motivation to develop programs of support designed to give them the tools they need to be successful in college and persist to graduation. Some institutions may argue that mentorship programs are cost prohibitive, but considering that “peer mentoring, at a cost of $80 per student, increased four-year enrollment by 4.5 percentage points” it seems like a worthwhile investment (Executive Office of the President, 2014, p. 24). Programs designed to help students and faculty understand “the rules” of higher education, or what some scholars call the hidden curriculum of college, may be the most effective (Smith, 2013). Often, these rules are not discovered until mistakes have been made or set-backs have been experienced but with the support of mentors some of these mistakes can be avoided or a student can receive follow-up support and experience future success.

Unveiling the hidden curriculum is probably one of the most easily identifiable solutions to accomplish for any college or university. Often, faculty and staff are not even aware that the language and academic protocol so familiar to them is unfamiliar to the first-generation students on campus (Smith, 2013). A structured approach to educating the faculty and staff about the hidden curriculum and how to best support students experiencing college for the first time is essential. If faculty can help first-generations students better understand the terms and norms of higher education, these students will spend more time on their academics and less time trying to navigate the system (Smith, 2013).

The factors and characteristics outlined in the review of literature are common obstacles at-risk students need to overcome to accomplish degree completion. Administrators recognize students need additional support which is evident in the number of programmatic interventions developed to support a students’ transition to college. Many of these programmatic interventions are successful in the first and even second year, but unfortunately, at-risk students still have low
degree completion rates. My study allows higher education professionals to hear from students themselves to further identify solutions to the degree completion dilemma. Hearing from students directly can lead to insights and solutions an educator may not be able to discover on their own. It also validates the programmatic support needed to aid in the success of at-risk students in college.

In addition to an examination of existing scholarship, one must also ground the research in a theoretical framework. The next section will outline the work of three primary theorists, hooks (1994), Rendon (2009), and Smith (2013). The work of these three theorists provided frameworks to consider as I continued the research on the persistence of at-risk students in higher education.

**Analytical Theory**

Although I could utilize traditional forms of educational theory such as Tinto’s (1993) model of student retention or Dewey’s (1916) democracy and education, my study required a different lens. Traditional theory, historically developed by White men, was based on the experiences of White men because that was the primary population pursuing higher education at the time (Thelin et. al, 2019). As elucidated in my literature review, many students classified as at-risk belong to under-represented groups. As a result, I hope through my inquiry framework to elevate scholars from under-represented groups whom I believe will provide a better framework for the students typically identified as at-risk. I do, however, need to credit Freire (1974) for the direction of my research. Through my doctoral work, I learned more about Freire’s teaching and learning. Freire’s dedication to hearing from those who are doing the work, who are experiencing an injustice or those we are trying to serve, reiterates the need to ask the students for their input and feedback. Often, administrators make assumptions about what students need
based on a students’ academic performance, but what if the student reveals a need completely different than expected? It is time to disrupt the pattern and Freire’s approach to meet the needs of “the oppressed” or in this case, the students institutions are trying to serve, is a model that could be used in higher education to help students help faculty and staff make pedagogical change.

As with Freire (1974), hooks (1994) and Rendon (2009) professed the need to be engaged with students as mutual learners and theoretically supported the argument to give students voice in the learning process. In addition hooks (1994), Rendon (2009), and Smith (2013) demonstrated a need for mentorship to support at-risk students. As a result, I used the following theories to analyze the themes and findings that will emerge from this investigation: Engaged Pedagogy (hooks 1994), Sentipensante Pedagogy (Rendon 2009), and Mentoring Cycle (Smith 2013).

**hooks and Engaged Pedagogy**

According to hooks (1994) the student to faculty relationship both in and outside of the classroom needs to shift to best support student learning. hooks (1994) outlined the five basic tenets of engaged pedagogy as:

- Conceptualization of Knowledge which counteracts hierarchical relations in social arrangements and often insidious cultural reproductions in schools.
- Linking Theory to Practice encourages educators to link theory to practice to avoid the perpetuation of elitism and teach to students lived realities.
- Student Empowerment which critiques the prescriptive roles of teachers as privileged voices and learners as passive recipients.
• Multicultural Aspect which encourages analysis of class, racism, power, capitalism, and other systems that keeps excluded ethnic groups powerless.

• Passion which promotes the need to make the classroom more exciting, honor the affective and rational lives of students, recognition of interdependence to counteract the hierarchical arrangements. (Florence, 1998, p. 76-77)

hooks encouraged “a union of mind, body and spirit” and the emphasis of “the inner life of students and teachers, a connection between learning in the classroom and life experience and the empowerment of teachers and students” (Rendon, 2009, p. 15). This often requires great vulnerability and the confidence to trust the educational process. hooks (1994) illustrates this need for vulnerability and classroom experimentation with the following:

One of the things that we must do as teachers is twirl around and around, and find out what works with the situation that we’re in. Our models might not work. And that twirling, changing, is part of the empowerment. (hooks, 1994, p. 128)

Not only do faculty need to be vulnerable to change, it is in their best interest to recognize when traditional teaching models may not work and be willing to make adjustments.

Engaged pedagogy takes on a different approach by engaging both the student and the faculty member in mutual learning often through guided discussion from the faculty member (hooks, 1994). The faculty member tries not to be the all-knowing individual in front of the classroom, simply transferring knowledge from the professor to the student. Rather, they sit among the students engaging in discussions that keep the students engaged with an enthusiasm for learning. The faculty member is willing to be a bit more vulnerable by letting go of the PowerPoint as a crutch for delivering the course content.
Curriculum and pedagogical reform encouraging engaged pedagogy could be a successful strategy influencing academic success for at-risk students, particularly for students of color. Smith (2013) argued that it is not necessarily that the institution of higher education needs to change, rather the need is to simply “unveil the hidden curriculum to all students which would provide students with equal access to the institutional cultural capital and social capital they need to succeed in higher education” (p. 17). Smith highlighted a definite need in higher education to support academic success in college. Bensimon (2005) believed the instructors delivering the curriculum and administrators creating policy need to make a change. According to Bensimon (2005), “individuals -- the way in which they teach, think students learn, and connect with students, and the assumptions they make about students based on their race and ethnicity -- can create the problems of unequal outcomes” (p. 101). There is clearly a need for both practices to support at-risk students. Masemann (1990) supported the argument of curriculum delivery, contending that a gap exists between academics and practitioners. Masemann stated that academics are “willfully ignoring or bypassing of large areas of teaching and learning that are not considered in the domain of valid knowledge” (p. 465). The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017) contended that “faculty may need to conceive of their roles in fundamentally new ways to facilitate open dialogue in the classrooms” (p. 14). Faculty and staff development is needed to ensure their own practices do not contribute to the unequal outcomes of at-risk students. In addition, diverse perspectives would contribute to an openness to explore alternative forms of curriculum delivery. But more importantly, faculty and staff need to operate from an equity frame versus a diversity or deficit framework (Benismon, 2005). Instead, faculty and staff, with the assistance of the student, should identify resources a student may need to a create a more equitable learning environment for all students.
Shor (1996) and hooks (1994) argued that democratization of the classroom, which engages both the students and the instructor in the learning process without the instructor standing in front of the classroom, can have a positive influence on students who may learn better from this approach to teaching and learning. Smith (2013) used Bourdieu’s theories on social capital to demonstrate how the US educational system contributes to ongoing inequality in society citing the power structures that favor middle to upper middle-class White students because the faculty and staff tend to be White and middle to upper-class.

hooks and Scapp (1994) demonstrated the use of dialogue to illustrate differences and commonality in opinion about teaching, writing, ideas and life. The entire US education system has been based on a teacher in front of the room sharing their knowledge. Some students thrive in that environment and others do not.

hooks (1994) shared a recollection of the first time they moved out from behind their desk at the front of the room. The experience led to the realization that standing behind the desk was about power and how they felt more in control behind the desk. True for most presenters and educators, there is some comfort in standing behind a podium, using notes as cues and illustrating authority by looking down over the classroom. It takes a person willing to be vulnerable and give all of that up to feel comfortable in a more democratic classroom format. Scapp (1994) argued that, in that moment when an instructor comes out from behind the podium, they become more human to their students. The students can then see the instructor as a mutual scholar willing to learn from the students while the students learn from the instructor. This change does not come without the risk of losing some legitimacy, especially from those who may be uncomfortable with the more democratic teaching format (hooks, 1994). The most progressive faculty members struggle with changing their curriculum or pedagogical practices,
even though they are fully aware that the change may result in better teaching and learning. It is hard to break from habitual behavior of the traditional classroom.

I offer an anecdote about my own personal experience to highlight the effects of engaged pedagogy. As I re-entered the classroom as an instructor for a common course required for all first-year students, I shared my transformative teaching philosophy with my students. Surprisingly, even as we engaged in lively class discussions, a student raised their hand about a month into the class and asked me when I was going to “teach” them something. This shocked me as it became very apparent with her hand and head gestures that she thought I should be standing in front of the classroom to teach them. Her gestures reinforced the expectations that even students thought I should stand in front of the classroom and transfer knowledge to them as the students. It served as a strong reminder that even though faculty need to get out of their teaching comfort zones, students also need to learn to expect something different than what they have experienced in high school or other courses in college.

hooks and Scapp (1994) offered that if educators are willing to allow relationships to form with students, the learning becomes more authentic. The ability to form relationships “allows your students, or yourself, to talk about experiences; sharing personal narratives yet linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances the capacity to know” (p. 148). It gives the student and the faculty member a voice in the learning process and “fosters active learning...creating opportunities for students to cognitively interact with one another and the faculty member as opposed to exposing information to students in a passive manner” (AAAS, 2017, p. 13). Ongoing faculty development is integral to develop the capacity needed to make a shift in the classroom which better supports the needs of the diverse group of students arriving on college campuses. As the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017) argued,
A deeper understanding of the relationship of teaching and student learning is needed and the many factors that affect this dynamic. Such factors include the discipline being taught, student characteristics, faculty awareness and commitment to effective teaching strategies, the delivery methods and uses of educational technology, and institutional rewards and incentives. There is far more systematic work on these matters in K-12 than in higher education. (p. 85)

This discussion of engaged pedagogy makes an argument that faculty development in both the areas of unveiling the hidden curriculum and curriculum/pedagogical reform is necessary to serve a new generation of students. A student body that is more diverse than higher education has previously experienced comes with a different set of needs that requires the institutions and the instructors who teach at them to shift in their thinking and their teaching. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017):

Faculty and Staff all need training and support to make possible campus cultures and classes that fully encourage active listening, discussion, and debate on controversial topics informed by the rigors of reason and evidence. Colleges and universities constitute one of the most important sites where people from various backgrounds and perspectives interact, learn with and from one another and grapple with difference. Being prepared to teach in an increasingly contentious and fractured world, where diversity is crucial, is difficult. (p. 23)

Changing the systemic understanding of how teachers should teach and how students should learn will take time and faculty will have to be mindful to continue to practice a shift in their teaching until it becomes a comfortable approach to teaching. hooks (1994) highlighted an example of a White English professor who included Toni Morrison on her syllabus yet was
unwilling to talk about race. The instructor knew her students needed exposure to this literature but talking about race was too risky for a White female. Higher education instructors must be culturally competent to properly deliver this crucial course content. This faculty member recognized the importance of the content, but now needs to develop the skills to effectively facilitate class discussions to support further learning of the literature.

I recently challenged a chemistry professor to think about delivering curriculum in a more democratic format to support more under-represented students to persist from the first year of college to graduation in the field of STEM. Her response was “there simply is no other way to teach chemistry” (G. Samuelson, personal communication, August 17, 2017). Many teachers may be willing to give up old ideas for new ways of thinking, but they cannot manage to make that shift in their classrooms. Many like this chemistry teacher will need to see evidence that change can have an impact on learning in a positive way before they willingly adjust their own teaching (Masemann, 1990).

Faculty teaching and preparation need attention to prepare instructors for the diverse group of students arriving on college campuses. “While there are many exceptions, across the undergraduate landscape good teaching is generally undervalued. Faculty are rarely trained, selected and assessed as teachers, and their effectiveness as instructors is rarely recognized or rewarded” (AAAS, 2017, p. 13). Engaging in regular and consistent faculty development on topics of the hidden curriculum and engaged pedagogy will provide faculty with the tools necessary to meet the needs of the changing student demographic which will ultimately support at-risk students and their persistence to graduation. To best understand what this new group of students needs to be successful, it is important to not only look at teaching and curriculum
delivery, but also to engage students in the conversation to best determine what is necessary to be successful in college.

Curriculum reform and its impact on student persistence and success needs more research and attention, but with further data, it could be an effective means to inform content delivery that may be more appealing to a diverse student body. Faculty are more likely to “work collaboratively to make curricula and program changes” with additional data (AAAS, 2017, p. 19). Rendon (2009) supported the transformative educational models of both hooks and Freire in her model for student support and engagement called sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogy, the second analytical theory in my literature review.

**Rendon and Sentipensante Pedagogy**

Rendon (2009) advocated for a different system of teaching and measurement of knowledge which better highlights a well-rounded approach to wisdom and knowledge valued by students from diverse communities. Rendon (2009) stated, “we have lost touch with the fine balance between educating for academics and educating for life” (p. 2). Unlike the Western approach of measuring knowledge based on linguistic and logical mathematical test scores, many cultures value knowledge gained in areas that are not so easily measurable. Rendon (2009) argued “along with intellectual pursuits, we need an education that is broadly defined and that addresses the notion that we are multifaceted human beings” (p. 29). Rendon believed that emotional intelligence is just as valuable as intellectual intelligence and can serve both students and their future employers well. As Rendon set up sentipensante pedagogy, the author specifically addressed the need for curriculum and teaching reform specifically when working with at-risk students and thoroughly described the students with whom I have worked and why I am so passionate about this work. Rendon (2009) stated:
Many of these students had been wounded by invalidating actions others had taken against them. For example, some had been told they were incapable of doing college-level work, were treated as stupid or lazy, or were stereotyped. It takes a special kind of professor and a unique kind of pedagogy to take these students from their self-doubts to a heightened awareness about their academic abilities and future potential. (p. 93)

Many at-risk students need someone to see their educational potential and change the narrative they have been conditioned to believe about their academic abilities. To successfully accomplish this, Rendon (2009) warns against the old vision of teaching and learning identified as:

- privileging intellectualism at the expense of inner knowing;
- disconnecting faculty from students;
- privileging competition over collaboration;
- leaving little room for error and imperfection;
- privileging Western structures of knowledge;
- engaging in busyness to the point of burnout;
- discouraging self-reflexivity and time for renewal. (Rendon, 2009, p. 112)

Sentipensante pedagogy counters these engrained educational practices and encourages educators to “work with individuals as whole human beings – intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual” while also recognizing “the connection between Western and non-Western ways of knowing” (Rendon, 2009, p. 135). The three major tenets of sentipensante pedagogy are to “disrupt and transform the entrenched belief system, cultivate well-rounded individuals who possess knowledge and wisdom and instill in learners a commitment to sustain life, maintain the rights of all people and preserve nature and harmony in the world” (Rendon, 2009, p. 135-6).

Although this may seem like a time-consuming and impossible approach to educating students, a
change is necessary to make strides in the graduation rates of the at-risk and very diverse students now entering college campuses. Solving this problem may require a major shift in traditional teaching methods by adopting at least a portion of the sentipensante pedagogy. Rendon (2009) stated, “when faculty work with the oppressed students while employing an ethic of care, compassion and validation, they often liberate students from self-limiting views and help students find voice and self-worth” (p. 140). What takes an even bigger shift on the part of educators is investing the time necessary to do this time-consuming work requiring educators to abandon “busyness” and make students a priority, as recommended by Rendon (2009). If teachers abandon busyness, time would be available to truly support and mentor students as recommended by Smith (2013), whose theory concludes the analytical theory section of my literature review.

**Smith and Mentoring Cycle**

Although there has been an establishment of many strategies to support at-risk students such as Bridge programs and mentorship opportunities, institutions without such interventions tend to focus more on the transition to college. Based on the literature, it seems few establish support systems that follow students through all four years of college. The mentoring cycle model designed by Smith (2013) supports this theory of on-going support and mentorship with a tiered approach to the type of mentorship a student needs at various points in their college career. If universities are dedicated to providing access to education, they need to not only provide intentional support for at-risk students in the first-year of college, but also throughout the duration of their college career to ensure students persist and graduate. Chang et. al. (1999) concluded that “minority groups in higher education have made some progress on improving access and retention of minority students, but much remains to be done” (13). One solution to
long-term support systems for at-risk students could be the development of an intentional mentorship program which lasts well beyond their first year of college.

Smith (2013) recommended a three-cycle mentoring model which includes advising, advocacy and apprenticeship and appears below:

Figure 1. Three-Cycle Mentoring Model (Smith, 2013, p. 62)

Smith (2013) described the first cycle of advising as a mentor telling a mentee “what to do” and it requires a low degree of capital from the faculty and the student involved in the process (p. 62). During this cycle, students may receive some helpful advice about navigating the hidden curriculum, like the importance of speaking to faculty members when a poor grade is received. For under-represented groups, a mentor may even help students navigate a faculty or staff member who may not be culturally competent or may not understand cultural norms and traditions that may require an academic accommodation. Within the advising cycle, mentors can provide varying degrees of support. An illustration of low-level support may be to simply tell a
mentee to email their faculty member, while a mentor giving higher level support may assist the mentee in choosing the appropriate language within the email (Smith, 2013).

Smith (2013) defined advocacy in this model as mentors who motivate their students to make connections with others on campus to help a student build their social capital. An example of a low-level degree of advocacy is a student admitting to a faculty member that they did not understand the lecture or an assignment. A students’ willingness to reach out to other faculty and staff members for assistance demonstrates their willingness to learn. This approach is commonly misunderstood by many first-generation students. These students often feel that exposing themselves in this way may illustrate to the faculty member that they are not prepared for college level work. A mentor who works with their student to reach out to the faculty member will help them overcome this fear. A high degree of advocacy may physically help the student make a face-to-face connection or may even call the professor themselves to discuss their students concerns.

Smith (2013) illustrated apprenticeship by explaining that a mentor assists their mentee by role playing a real scenario that a student wants to address with the faculty member. The mentor may coach the student on how to set up the meeting, what to do in the meeting and what to do after the meeting. The two of them not only practice what the student is going to say prior to the meeting, but also process it once the meeting is over. The goal is to assist the student with “four main academic topics (1) receiving feedback on written assignments (2) learning how to discuss grades with professors; (3) learning how to participate in classroom discussions; and (4) learning how to conduct an independent research project” (Smith, 2013, p. 73). The highest level of apprenticeship could include an invitation from the faculty to the mentee to join them in research in their area of study.
No matter the level of faculty involvement in a student’s college career, “effective student/faculty interactions are correlated with increased retention and completion rates, better grades, standardized test scores, and higher career and graduate school aspirations” (AAAS, 2017, p. 12). This reiterates the faculty/student interactions both in and outside of class as a high impact practice and institutions should implement systems that allow for the support and encouragement of these interactions. The model Smith (2013) shared specifically tackles the current educational system and encourages practitioners to educate at-risk students how to navigate that system.

The categories highlighted in the review of the literature demonstrate a need to better understand the student perspective of the obstacles they face as they attempt to earn their college degree. Bensimon (2005) explored “inequality in educational outcomes for historically underserved groups from the perspective of organizational learning theory” and made “a case for how to understand and address the cultural and structural barriers that preclude college and universities from producing equitable educational outcomes for students” (p. 99). Bensimon (2005) set out to illustrate that “institutional actors are more predisposed to consider the educational status of underrepresented groups from the standpoint of diversity or deficit” (p.100) rather than from a standpoint of equity. Bensimon (2005) highlighted how important it is for those with influential roles on campus to put themselves in the shoes of underrepresented students. More likely than not, faculty and staff associate deficit with Black and Hispanic students and achievement with White and Asian students (Bensimon, 2005).

Bensimon (2005) used grounded theory to advocate for the use of double-loop learning to focus on the “root causes of a problem” (p.104). and solutions for change to produce better results versus assuming underrepresented groups were not capable of succeeding. Students often
develop a reputation during their K-12 experience, maybe even an unearned reputation, that they cannot shake no matter how hard they work to improve their grades and demonstrate their ability to learn. As college students, they have an opportunity to start over as they enter institutions of higher education. Educators need to see these students as potential scholars instead of stereotyping their ability to succeed based on the color of their skin. Further, educators should identify resources needed to support at-risk students and ensure equitable college degree attainment.

Discovering solutions to the obstacles at-risk students face requires educators and researchers to engage and receive feedback from the very students they are trying to serve. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017) posited, “more needs to be known about what students expect and how well they connect what they learn in college to their lives after college” (p. 85). Shedd (2015) concurred and pointed out the gap between those trying to solve the problems faced by our youth and the youth themselves. According to Shedd (2015), “although as educators and researchers, as politicians and cultural critics, we routinely lament the problems of today, we spend precious little time seriously trying to understand their motivations and their experiences (p. xiv). This is not a new, but often forgotten, concept.

**Summary, Gaps and Tensions in the Literature**

While the review of literature above confirms the findings of the report conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017), more research needs to be conducted to determine why support initiatives work well for some at-risk students while others do not persist to graduation. Although many of these students enter college, their persistence to degree completion is not as successful when compared to many of their peers. Scholars, such as those contributing to a report published by the National Center for Postsecondary Research (2012),
have conducted studies on the success of college transition programs, but researchers need to further explore how to continue to support at-risk students in years two, three, and four of their college careers. My study investigates possible solutions not yet identified by college administrators and faculty by speaking directly to the students at the site of this study.

Throughout the current research, the student voice is missing. As Freire (1974) recommends, the best way to learn about the needs of people you serve is go to them directly to hear their needs. This approach could work with at-risk students to hear from students directly about those needs and the obstacles they face in obtaining a degree in higher education. The absence of student voice is an evident gap in the literature and this key data is necessary to solve the problem of at-risk student persistence. I sought to fill this gap by conducting interviews with at-risk students in my study, to discover solutions to at-risk student attrition. The students themselves are the intellectuals of their own experience and they have a story to tell. In the methodology section, I outline how I conducted the research and sought this information from the students.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

My study aimed to analyze the experiences of at-risk undergraduate college students at one Midwest university. Through analysis of qualitative data directly from the students, I outline what at-risk students identify as integral to ensuring their persistence to graduation. This chapter will outline why the use of qualitative research was relevant to this single site case study, will review a pragmatic and transformative approach to research, will briefly describe a pilot study I conducted and will explain the methods used in this study. In the methods section, I will describe the site of the study, explain how I determined my samples selection, and the process used for data collection.

Qualitative Research

In order to accomplish my goal to lift student voices, a qualitative research approach in this study was necessary to identify factors influencing student retention and graduation. The qualitative data in my study helps uncover different aspects of the student experience not always obvious to the researcher. Qualitative research provides the opportunity for students to share their stories, which may reveal factors needing further consideration that may not be as readily identifiable through quantitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Not all factors can be uncovered through quantitative data analysis and as stated by Heaney and Fischer (2011) “there is no magic bullet – especially for individuals who enter college with at-risk characteristics – to ensure that students will continue on the collegiate path” (p. 62). Interviews may uncover data needing further exploration as solutions to the success of at-risk students by, as supported by Patton’s (2015) “seven ways in which qualitative inquiry contributes to our understanding of the world, which are: illuminating meanings, studying how things work, capturing stories to
understand people’s perspectives and experiences, elucidating how systems function and their consequences on peoples lives, understanding context: how it matters and why, identifying unanticipated consequences and making comparisons to discover important patterns and themes” (pg. 3-12). This research encapsulates all seven of the characteristics as highlighted by Patton. More importantly, qualitative research allowed the student voice to inform the findings and the analysis of this study. What is missing from the existing research is the student voice which can only truly be gathered through qualitative research. The stories from the participants in this study, as Freire (1974) recommends, allow the reader to hear directly from the students higher education is attempting to serve.

**Case Study**

This qualitative research is a single site case study at a small liberal arts college located in the Upper Midwest. The goal of this case study was to identify both successful initiatives and obstacles in place influencing persistence to graduation for at-risk students at one university. A case study is relevant to this research because it requires a look at “the recent past and the present, not just the past” (Yin, 2018, p. 12). In addition, a case study is a relevant research method for this study because I want to “understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to my case” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). My study seeks to understand the real-world experiences of the participants from the cite of this study to inform educators what at-risk students need to persist to graduation. In doing so, my goal was to “expand and generalize theories” based on the real-life experiences shared with me, the researcher, during the interview process (Yin, 2018, p. 21). The single site case study is appropriate because the participants are a part of a common experience which
allowed me to “capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday experience” for at-risk students in a higher education environment (Yin, 2018, p. 50).

My pragmatic approach to the research revealed “practical consequences and useful applications of what we can learn about this problem” (Patton, 2015, p.99). As the participants revealed practical solutions to the problem, I as the researcher remained flexible in my approach to ensure the best possible research outcome. The next section will review a pragmatic and transformative approach to research and the methods used in this study.

**Pragmatism and Transformative Research**

Due to the research questions presented, a combination of a pragmatic and transformative frameworks guided this study. Patton (2015) described a pragmatist as a researcher who seeks practical and useful answers that can solve or provide direction in “addressing concrete problems” (p. 152). As a researcher from the dominant culture, it was important that I remained open to solutions these students revealed to me throughout the interviews to address the problem of the persistence of at-risk students in higher education. The need to remain flexible in the research and determine the best research method implementation was crucial to determine the best questions to use during the interviews to ensure the best outcomes. I found this to be true as I conducted a pilot interview to test my interview questions. A transformative framework served as a useful guide because many of the participants in the research are from under-represented groups. In addition, I hope that the research will help guide and inform university administrators and faculty members about best approaches, as identified by the participants, to support at-risk students’ persistence to graduation. Utilizing qualitative methods and a pragmatic approach to the research, the next section will outline my research approach.
Pilot Study

Once I determined my research questions, I developed a list of interview questions I felt would help me answer those questions. As recommended by Yin (2014), I utilized a pilot study to help “refine my data collection plans to develop relevant lines of questions” (p. 96). This pilot study was based on “data from participants who have experienced the process” (Patton, 2015, p. 82). The pilot study helped me refine my interview questions which I hoped would lead to better responses from the participants selected for my study. I contacted a student who was admitted into the LEAP program and was a resident of the Emerging Scholars Living-Learning Community to serve as a participant in my pilot study to test my interview questions. I conducted the interview in a conference room at the site of the study. I reviewed the consent form and reminded them they could pass on any question in which they did not feel comfortable answering and told them they could conclude the interview at any time. The participant in the pilot study was helpful in identifying the need to ask a question about family influence on college attendance and persistence. Although I did not include a question about family in my original set of interview questions, the participant brought it up during the interview and I knew a question on the topic of family would be an essential question in my study. I then wanted to ensure I found answers to these newly developed questions from the rest of my participants. Topics brought up by the student led to a change in my questions even right in the moment of that pilot interview. The pilot interview illustrated the need to utilize a transformative framework recommended by Freire (1974) to conduct the research. I fell into the typical phase one of the research process by bringing my own experience and assumptions to the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I developed questions I thought would result in good research content, but as I sat with the participant I learned that different or modified questions were necessary. I demonstrated my membership of the dominant culture as my interview questions resembled a
familiarity with higher education and the questions did not necessarily fit this population of students. A transformative framework reminds the researcher that traditional theories “do not fit marginalized individuals or groups” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25). In the next section I outline the methods of my study which include the site where I conducted the research, how I recruited and selected participants for this study and how I collected the data.

Methods

In this section I will describe the setting of the study and the current programmatic efforts in place to support the transition to college for at-risk students. I will then describe the recruitment and selection process of the participants in this study and will describe the data collection process.

Study Setting

The site of this study was a small, liberal arts college educating primarily women in the Upper Midwest with an overall student population of 5,000. The traditional undergraduate student population is approximately 3,000 students at the site of this study. This institution was chosen due to the implementation of recent support efforts particularly targeting at-risk students in which I have been significantly involved: first as a member of a retention work-group, later as a key implementer of a new Living-Learning Community designed for at-risk students living on campus, and finally as a member of the committee expanding the curriculum of the Living-Learning Community to the entire first-year class.

The first-year Living-Learning Community, known as the Emerging Scholars, began the fall of 2014, about four years prior to the start of this study. The residents of the Emerging Scholars Floor consist of students who are both Learning Enrichment and Advising Program (LEAP) students and students who chose to live on campus. LEAP students are admitted to the
University through this conditional program to provide additional support because of particular characteristics in their application which caused concern for their ability to do well in college and as a result are considered at-risk college students. The students are subject to a rigorous admission process before they are eligible for acceptance through the LEAP program. An applicant with any one of the following characteristics automatically goes to the admissions committee for further review:

- ACT composite less than 21 or a SAT score of 1060-1090
- high school GPA lower than 3.0
- ACT score of 17 or 460-480 or lower on any sub score of English, reading, math or science
- discrepancy of a high ACT and low GPA or vice versa
- first language is not English and has lived in the United States for eight years or less
- an applicant with a GED

Students who have less than a 3.4 GPA with indicators, such as a poor writing sample or an inconsistent GPA versus ACT or SAT score, on their application, that may cause the study site admissions committee to question their academic success at the institution, are automatically required to have a pre-admission interview (admissions committee, personal communication, November 1, 2017). These interviews are designed to better understand the students’ academic inconsistencies and determine whether an applicant should be admitted to the institution.

The Living-Learning Community was marketed to any student who desired extra support in the transition to college but was heavily marketed to the students identified as LEAP students during the admissions process. Students identified as at-risk received conditional admittance to the university and have been paired into a common course and either a development writing or math course dependent upon their curricular trouble-spots as identified by the ACT and their high school grades. The intention behind the addition of the Living-Learning Community was to provide both professional and peer support. A series of programs called “Dine and Learns”
allowed students to eat while learning about topics such as time-management, study skills, mindset, preparing for mid-terms and finals, stress relief, and career exploration with an effort on identifying a “plan B” for students who came to the university to be a nursing major or other majors requiring difficult prerequisites.

Each student had a peer study advocate assigned to them who conducted periodic individual check-ins with each student. The first check-in occurred at the beginning of the year to better understand the students’ background, stress areas, and goals. The second check-in occurred at the beginning of the second semester to reflect on the first semester, and to re-assess students’ study habits and time-management skills to make improvements going into the second semester of their first year of college.

To assess the program, the Institutional Research Department staff at the site of the study collected data on the group of students identified as at-risk (LEAP) who participated in the program, at-risk students who did not participate in the program, and the general admits to allow for comparisons between the three different groups. Although assessment data collected from the site of the current study from 2014-2017 suggested that students who participated in the Emerging Scholars program tended to do well in their first year with this level of support, their persistence through all four years of college was still low (61%) compared to the general student body (71%). Nonetheless, these students persisted at higher rates (61%) than their at-risk (LEAP) peers (49%) who did not participate in the Emerging Scholars program designed to provide additional support for at-risk students.

Although these participants were involved in the LEAP program, the data mentioned above demonstrated the efforts of this program designed to support at-risk students with their transition to college was not as successful in supporting college student persistence to graduation
at this one Midwestern institution. One puzzling aspect of this low persistence rate is the lack of clarity about reasons students leave the institution prior to graduation. Reflection on the data associated with this group of student warrants further exploration of the issue of persistence. The findings of this current study will inform or provide recommendations to other institutions serving at-risk students to improve retention and graduation rates. The need seems clear; students place their hopes and dreams on a college education and research needs to explore effective support strategies to help these students reach their academic aspirations.

Sample Selection

Students admitted to the university as participants in the LEAP program were candidates for participation in my study. I received names of students in the 2013-2018 LEAP cohorts from the Registrar and the Institutional Research, Planning and Accreditation Department at the site of the study to begin data collection. I chose to interview the persisters just prior to graduation because I knew it would be easier to get students to agree to an interview if they were still on campus. By utilizing a stratified purposeful sampling approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I was able to draw comparisons between students who persist to graduation and those who do not graduate from college. Recruitment letters for both groups of students, persisters and non-persisters, were approved by the institutional review board at both the University of St. Thomas and the university at which the study was conducted (See Appendices B and C).

The data collection started as the first Emerging Scholars participants reached graduation, but the participant list was not limited to just those that participated in Emerging Scholars. I decided to include all LEAP students in my participant recruitment to ensure a large enough sample of participants. I sent an email to the list of potential participants utilizing a recruitment letter (See Appendices B and C), and offered a Target gift card in exchange for their time to
conduct the interview. Out of the 28 students contacted that persisted to graduation, six of them agreed to participate in the interview for a response rate of 21%. Of the 49 students contacted that did not persist to graduation, seven people participated in the interview, resulting in a response rate of 14%. I emailed all 77 potential participants and the response rate was smaller than I anticipated even with a small incentive of a Target gift card. When I was not having much luck with participants, the Associate Dean of Students and Retention wrote a follow-up email requesting their participation in the study to help the institution learn from the research which did not produce any further results. As a result, in total, I obtained 13 total participants, six who persisted to graduation and seven who did not persist to graduation.

Thirteen students participated in the interviews. I organized the findings thematically and used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The participants were a diverse group of students, half of whom grew up in Minnesota, while the other half grew up in Texas and California. Half of the participants are students of color and 80% are first generation status students. The next section of this study will describe how the data was collected.

**Data Collection**

Once the pilot study was complete, I began my research and data collection for my study from additional qualifying participants. The study includes participants admitted as traditional-aged college students designated as at-risk and placed in a conditional admit program (known as LEAP) by the University. My research utilized interviews with two groups of LEAP students: 1) those persisting to graduation and 2), students who did not persist to graduation. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board Approval, I began the data collection methods which included interviews of 13 LEAP students. The questions asked during the interviews were standardized across all interviews to make the data analysis easier, but are also open-ended to allow for the
unique narrative of each participant to come through (Patton, 2015). Allowing open-ended answers minimizes the weakness of the standardized question as outlined by Patton (2015).

Each participant gave their consent to complete the interview by completing the consent form (See Appendix D). Nine of my interviews occurred over the phone. These participants either read and returned the consent form via email or read the consent form and emailed a return email indicating they had read the consent form and agreed to proceed with the interview. The rest of the interviews occurred in person in a conference room at the site of the study. The length of the interviews ranged from 23 to 55 minutes. I recorded the interviews and used a transcription service to transcribe the recorded interviews. I designed the questions during the interview process (See Appendices E and F) as a look-back on their college years with the hope that they would be able to identify the essential support they received and identify obstacles they faced. I asked similar questions of both groups. I hoped that the questions would allow participants to identify the support they received as a LEAP student, but also inform the research about other areas to consider when determining support systems to put in place to better meet the needs of this group of students.

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend conducting 20-60 interviews to reach the point of saturation. However, due to the topic of my research and the relatively low number of potential participants, I set a goal of conducting interviews with 12 participants. In the end, 13 participants contributed to this study. I conducted interviews and collected data until I was “confident that things make sense and [I] begin to believe the data” (Patton, 2015, p. 406). As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) point out, “an interview is where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 4). After conducting my findings, and completing the analysis of the data, I did member-check my data (Patton, 2015) by sending
chapters four and five to the participants of this study and asking them to send any feedback within a week. I received confirmation of the accuracy of my data from six of the 13 participants, representing both persisters and non-persisters to graduation. I intended for this research to inform university decision makers of recommended action steps based on data gathered from “a large number of participants” (Patton, 2015, p. 82). Although the number of interviews conducted may not be large, it is considerable based on the relatively low number of students initially available to participate in the study.

Further, although my research pertains to the persistence of at-risk students in college, I chose to incorporate the participants’ K-12 experiences into the interview questions because the K-12 experience and their perceptions of that experience strongly influence a student’s college mindset and academic preparedness, as supported in the literature review. Table 3.1 below demonstrates the interview questions asked of the participants in relation to the research question I hoped to answer. For example, their high school experience and the academic poverty they experienced could have influenced the obstacles the participants faced in attempting to complete their college degrees.

Table 3.1

Connection between Interview Questions and Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Sections</th>
<th>Research Q1: What do at-risk students identify as support systems that most contributed to their persistence through graduation from college</th>
<th>Research Q2: What do at-risk students identify as obstacles to completing their degrees?</th>
<th>Research Q3: What do at-risk students identify as systematic university changes that need to be implemented to support their persistence through college?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School Experience</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending College</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One cannot look at the college years in isolation without understanding what informed a student’s decision to enter college and the perceptions they had of their ability to complete their college degrees. As a result, the findings include both K-12 and college experiences to inform the study. The next section will outline my data analysis process.

**Data Analysis**

This section outlines the process for qualitative data analysis to help tell the story of at-risk students and the type of support they identify as necessary to obtain a college degree. I obtained the participants’ data during in-depth individual interviews. Utilizing the transcripts of my interviews conducted, I coded the data to organize and identify emergent themes and determine the best way to share the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I conducted several rounds of reading through the transcripts to begin the process of “coding and condensing the codes to identify prevalent themes” and originally started out with 29 different codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 183). I chose a hand-coding strategy to determine my themes and took notes manually while I initially read through the transcripts, highlighting key words or phrases to code the transcript. As I re-read the transcripts several times, I reduced the codes to two main themes with seven sub-themes by counting the frequency of each code. Once I completed the coding...
process, I summarized my thoughts based on the information gathered and report the data in chapter four of this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Each transcript influenced potential prevalent themes for my overall research, so an open mind was necessary each time I read through each interview transcript. I created a spreadsheet of essential data to “locate files efficiently” (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once I organized the data, I continued the analysis including all of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This coding process was essential to ensure I captured the stories of the participants to better inform the work higher education professionals are doing to support at-risk students. Re-reading each transcript and taking this hands-on approach allowed me to absorb the data and ensure I properly captured the thoughts and concerns of the participants of this study.

Validity of Analysis

Yin (2018) warns researchers about internal validity concerns when conducting case study research because it can result in inferences by the researcher. Yin (2018) states, “a case study involves an inference every time an event cannot be directly observed” (p. 45). Conducting a qualitative study utilizing interviews versus collecting data that can be observed creates an environment that can jeopardize internal validity. To protect against internal validity concerns, I sent all 13 of my participants chapter four and chapter five of my study to read, review and ensure I analyzed the data appropriately. Six participants out of the 13 in this study responded and confirmed that I had represented their experiences accurately. The remaining seven participants did not respond to my email.

Ethical Considerations

As the director of residence life for most of my research and an instructor for a LEAP section of a common course for all first-year students, I have been able to get to know this group
of students well. Students may have felt that choosing not to participate in the study would impact their grade, housing preferences for the following year, or even how I might address a conduct situation if they found themselves with a conduct violation. To avoid any risk to the students for non-participation in my survey or interviews, I specifically planned my interviews near the students’ graduation date. In addition, I included the traditional statement on the consent form that participation is optional, and they can choose to stop the interview at any time. As an administrator involved in developing support programs for at-risk students, my participation as a researcher was on a continuum from full participant, as one of their course instructors, to complete spectator for the students who were neither in my class nor living on the Living-Learning Community in the residence hall (Patton, 2015). As a full participant, I hoped to “better understand the feelings” of the students and better “understand what it feels like” to be a student in this setting (Patton, 2015, p. 334), which was already a realized benefit of teaching a LEAP section of the common course. Although my role as full participant was not used in my final research, I used some of my observations as supporting information highlighting points illustrated throughout my literature review.

Limitations of the Study

Some challenges I faced during my study include the lack of literature about role models of color and the impact of this reality on the student experience. Although I was initially concerned that my status as a White woman would influence the participation rate for students of color; this did not prove to be true as my participant group was very racially diverse. I do wonder if my race influenced the research during my data collection. I was surprised that the students did not identify the lack of role models of color in their faculty and staff as an obstacle. I wonder if they themselves did not recognize this as a concern or whether they were concerned
about mentioning this concern to me. In an effort to interpret the data of a student experience so different from my own, I used theories and frameworks written by scholars from underrepresented groups rather than the traditional scholars to best frame my approach to this research. Many at-risk students are students of color, and therefore I hoped that the utilization of theories properly represented this group and strengthened my study.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to determine what at-risk students identify as support systems contributing to their college academic success and the obstacles they encounter in completing their degrees. Although students enter college at larger numbers than in the past, many students considered at-risk do not graduate at the same rates of students not considered at-risk. I explored how at-risk students experienced their education and asked them directly about the obstacles, challenges, and successes they experienced in pursuing their degree to better inform higher education educators and administrators of the unique needs of at-risk students. I aimed to assist institutions of higher education to best support the learning of at-risk students and ultimately improve the persistence and graduation rates of this particular group of students.

In this chapter I begin with a brief description of each of the participants in this study. I interviewed 13 students identified as at-risk in their college admissions process. The participants well represented the overall student population of the site of this study in the categories of low-income, first-generation, and students from other under-represented groups. Many of the participants faced multiple obstacles in their higher education journey. In the greater portion of chapter four, I describe my findings which paints a picture of the successes and challenges faced by at-risk students. Analysis of the data suggested the following sub-themes: academic poverty, lack of pre-college support, family influence, personal motivation, financial obstacles, first-generation, and curriculum delivery as influencing at-risk college student success.

Description of Participants

The section below provides a description of each of the participants in my study. The overall population of LEAP students at the site of the study consisted of 387 students from fall
2013 to fall 2018. Of the 387 students, 48.2% did not graduate and were not enrolled as of spring 2019. This student population is very diverse with 48.8% first generation students, 66.7% multicultural students and 70.5% are Pell Grant Recipients. The LEAP participants in this study are a good representation of the demographics of the overall LEAP population at the site of the study. I have divided the participants into two groups: those who persisted to graduation, which includes six of the participants, and those who stepped away from college prior to graduation, which includes seven of the participants.

**Students Who Persisted to Graduation**

The students in this section were accepted in the LEAP program, and remained in college through graduation. Each student had their own academic struggles but despite these struggles, remained in school and earned a college degree.

**Sabrina.** Sabrina grew up in California and is a Black student, from a large high school, with an auditory processing disorder. Despite experiencing a lack of support from high school teachers and guidance counselors, Sabrina individually pursued an opportunity to take college level credits at a local community college to complete a high school degree. Although high school teachers regularly reminded her she was not college material, Sabrina pursued acceptance at a four-year institution despite their cautionary advice. She graduated within four years with a degree in history.

**Patti.** Patti, a Latina woman, born in Mexico, spent most of her youth bouncing her residency between Mexico and the United States. Patti is an English as second language student, consequently, her mother determined she needed to stay in the United States for high school so that she could improve her English-speaking skills. As her family struggled with homelessness, Patti struggled with the cultural and familial expectation to marry after high school to improve
the family’s economic situation. Patti would not allow her culture to thwart her own desire to pursue higher education as a solution to her economic status. With a mother who did not have the financial means to support her, Patti was determined to work and save money for college and started working as a custodian in her high school. Personal finances were a constant struggle for Patti to manage. Despite her financial situation, she graduated within four years with a degree in social work.

Janet. Janet is a Caucasian woman who grew up in South Minneapolis and had what she defined as a typical high school experience. It was instilled in her at a young age that she would attend college. The institution was not Janet’s dream school. She originally wanted to attend art school but after discussing her desired major with her parents it became clear it may not be a financially lucrative post-graduation option. Janet also felt the need to be selective about where she applied to college due to the costs associated with the college admissions process. This limited her choices as she focused only on schools more likely to accept her application. Janet completed college within five years with an environmental science degree.

Inez. Inez, a Latina woman, grew up in a small town in California and credits her readiness to apply for college to Upward Bound, TRIO and AVID, all programs designed to prepare students for college. Unfortunately, she felt her high school did not properly prepare her for life after high school. As a product of a small-town school district, Inez did not have access to upper-level class choices. In addition, advanced placement (AP) and IB classes were not available to her at her high school. Inez and her brother were first-generation college students and her older brother served as a role model for her college pursuits. She graduated with a degree in social work.
Nancy. Nancy grew up in a very large school district in Minnesota and worked very hard to earn straight A’s in school. A significant family event triggered a change in her academics and she unable to maintain the expectations she set for herself. Nancy indicated that she “hit rock bottom and my school did not have the resources to get me back to where I needed to be.” The school was so large, students only had access to two meetings a year with their school counselor. As a result, she developed a pessimistic attitude towards school. Although Nancy was not meeting her own expectations, she was earning passing grades. Her father encouraged her to apply for college but after he passed away, she ruled college out as a post-high school option. When a high school teacher intervened and encouraged her to try college for one year, she changed her mind and decided to apply to college. She pursued college, even though others in her school were doubtful she could get in and complete a four-year degree. She defied the odds and graduated with a social work degree in May of 2019.

Elsie. Elsie attended a very small high school with only 42 students in her graduating class. As a result, the school had very basic course offerings and did not have a lot of choices or special classes. She described herself as an average student who struggled in math but had motivation to stay after school to get the help she needed. She excelled in science which ultimately steered her towards a career in health care. She did not receive much support from her high school counselor to attend a four-year college. Her counselor refused to send Elsie’s transcripts to this institution because her ACT scores were not good enough, even though she had taken the ACT test five times. Her counselor indicated she would be better off attending a two-year school. Elsie continued to push on her counselor until she ultimately sent in the transcripts. After Elsie received acceptance to the institution, she decided to take the ACT one more time because it could assist in receiving more scholarship money. As a “farm-kid” she needed all the
financial assistance she could obtain as she was responsible for funding most of her own college education. She graduated with a degree in respiratory care in May of 2019.

**Students Who Did Not Persist to Graduation**

The students in this next section enrolled and attended classes in the institution but did not persist to graduation. Each cited various reasons for their early departure from college.

**Bernice.** Bernice is a Caucasian woman who grew up in a large suburban school district in the south metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul. In addition to her status as a sexual assault survivor, Bernice also suffered from a variety of medical and personal issues which influenced her ability to do well in high school. From an attempted suicide resulting in a month-long hospitalization to her battles with ADD, ADHD, bi-polar disorder and a thyroid condition, Bernice experienced many distractions that pulled her away from her high school academic life. Although she did not want to go to college, she did not have a choice in the decision. Her relatives attended college and she felt this immense pressure to do the same. According to Bernice, she did not graduate from college because her lack of desire to pursue higher education translated to poor grades in college.

**Catherine.** Catherine, a Latina Woman from Texas, always wanted to attend college and wanted to be the first member of her family to earn a college degree. She graduated from a college preparatory middle school and high school that was intently focused on getting their students to and through college. She loved her college experience but unfortunately had to leave for financial reasons.

**Mary.** Mary, a low-income, first-generation college student grew up in Texas. Although she grew up in a low-income city, her school principal was very passionate about securing funds for the school. In addition, this principal invested significant effort into preparing her students for state exams, which helped them secure additional funding not only from the state, but also
from the private sector such as HEB grocery stores. The better they scored, the more resources they would receive from these sources. The principal used the extra funding to secure necessary programming initiatives such as after-school tutors, after school activities and extended teacher office hours. The principal also purchased new text books for the classrooms. Despite these initiatives to combat her experience with K-12 academic poverty, Mary did not graduate from college.

**Eleanor.** Eleanor is a half Mexican and half Native American, from a large, very diverse, urban high school. Eleanor credits College Possible for her ability to get into college. Prior to her involvement in College Possible, she was falling asleep in class and did not take her homework seriously. Although her family members were encouraging her to do well so she could eventually attend college, her mom did not finish high school. Eleanor did not understand the importance of attending college. Until she met her College Possible coach, she did not have academic role models. She deferred her decision to attend college until May 5th of her senior year, which is typically late in the admissions cycle. Originally intending to attend a two-year institution, her College Possible coach encouraged her to pursue a four-year degree. As a student with an Individual Education Program (IEP) plan which allowed her accommodations in high school due to her disability, she was familiar with a small, diverse class setting. Although the student-to-faculty ratio is 12 to one at this institution, Eleanor indicated she needed smaller classes and more one-on-one support to be academically successful. She indicated that the common course taught at this institution was the classroom in which she felt most comfortable because of the diverse nature of her classmates. There, she could speak up. In her other classes, she kept silent. As a result of the circumstances Eleanor faced, she did not graduate from college.
Ruth. Ruth went to a suburban school district in Minnesota. As a student with dyslexia, she had to work hard to earn good grades. Her mother finished her college degree as a non-traditional student with a family. As a result, Ruth’s mother served as a role model and encouraged her to attend a four-year institution. Finances were a significant concern for her, and she cites the inability to drop below 12 credits at the risk of losing her financial aid as the ultimate reason for her early departure from college. Her dyslexia required her to focus more intently on a smaller number of classes per semester. She eventually wants to go back for a degree as an occupational therapy assistant but needs to secure enough funds so that she can take her classes at her own pace.

Emma. Emma was the only participant who discontinued studies at this institution but then did eventually re-enroll in a different university and successfully completed a degree. Emma has dyslexia and found a supportive private high school in California to help her navigate her disability. As a first-generation college student Emma received a lot of encouragement from her parents and her high school guidance counselor to attend college. The disabilities resources office and the support it provided led to the decision to attend this institution. Emma cites finances, inability to decide on a major, and homesickness as the three primary reasons she did not stay at the site of this study, stating: “money was an issue, figuring out what I wanted to do with my life and then I was really homesick.” However, she understood the value of a college degree and knew completing a degree somewhere was necessary to find a good job. After transferring three different times, she finally completed her degree.

Martha. Martha missed a lot of high school because her father suffered from a chronic disease and she had to help care for him. Her high school teachers were supportive, but the flexibility and support made the transition to college very difficult as the same level of
understanding did not exist in her college experience. She put “all of her eggs in one basket” and only applied to this institution. Martha planned to take a gap year if the institution did not accept her for enrollment. Finances were a concern for her attending college, particularly due to her father’s health issues. Martha eventually left the institution because she did not earn the grades necessary to be accepted into the nursing program.

In this section I gave a brief description of the participants in this study. In the following section I will share my findings based on the interviews conducted with each of these participants.

**Thematic Findings**

I present the following findings in two sections. The first section discusses obstacles to degree completion which includes the emergence of academic poverty, pre-college support, family influence, lack of personal motivation, financial obstacles, first-generation student status and curriculum delivery as sub-themes. The second section examines support systems to degree completion and includes the emergence of pre-college support, family influence, personal motivation, curriculum delivery, peer mentorship, Living-Learning communities, and faculty/staff support as sub-themes.

**Obstacles to Degree Completion**

All participants in my study experienced obstacles to their degree completion. This section highlights those experiences which can help inform educators about the need for both behavioral and systematic changes needed to better support at-risk students in their educational pursuits. This section is organized in the following sub-themes: academic poverty, lack of pre-college support, family influence, lack of personal motivation, financial obstacles, first-generation status, and curriculum delivery.
**Academic poverty.** The first obstacle to degree completion that emerged from the interviews was academic poverty in their K-12 experience. Five participants identified a lack of resources, such as disability resources and upper-level college preparatory classes available in their high schools, as deficits to their college preparation. Sabrina shared her struggle to navigate her learning disability and college preparation. Instead of access to classes in high school that could properly prepare her for college rigor, Sabrina’s school placed her in classes that would not support her ability to go to college. She shared, “I got the basic math and English, because everyone had to do that, but my extra classes, they put me in art and yearbook. They never took time to know me as a student.” As a result, she felt her school never quite knew what to do for her or how to support her. Patti was born in Mexico and stated, “it was a very different experience from other students who were raised here. Because my English was very limited, my resources weren’t as available as other students.” Inez and Elsie both shared that their small-town schools did not offer advanced classes due to a lack of resources. Their high school classes were not challenging and did not prepare them for the ACT and SAT. As a result, this influenced both their test scores and their ability to be prepared for college. Although Mary lived in a low-income neighborhood, the principal in her school was very motivated to get outside funds to support student academics. Food and housing insecurities were prevalent for Mary’s community which required a free “school lunch program and they made sure students got food before they left school for the day to make sure they had an evening meal.” Elsie’s experience illustrates both the academic and financial poverty experienced by Elsie’s community. Elsie indicated her ACT test scores were so low, that even after she took it five times, her high school guidance counselor refused to send her transcripts to this institution for admissions consideration.
Many of the students experienced academic poverty, a factor out of their control and needing attention by leaders and educators to provide an equitable learning experience for all students. Some students often do not understand the existence of academic poverty in their lives until they attempt to attend college. The academic poverty experienced by these participants may have had an influence on the type of support they received as they approached college.

**Lack of pre-college support.** The second sub-theme that emerged was lack of support that existed for at-risk students as they considered college. Two of the participants had purely negative experiences while five had negative experiences with one positive role model or mentor who saw their potential. The type of support the participants received influenced each person in diverse ways.

The lack of pre-college support can be directly correlated with the perceived abilities of students by educators in the schools the participants attended. Sabrina shared “I was told many times that because of my learning disability I was not a student who would qualify for college and they wouldn’t support me with that [college exploration].” She went on to say, “I learned that college was an option without my high school’s help.” Janet recognized that high school teachers easily give up on students who do not understand the content rather than adjusting the teaching style to ensure students grasp the content. She stated,

>When I was not really excited about a particular subject, I didn’t get much feedback and [they assumed] that I didn’t like a particular subject and they didn’t try to push further to try different options or to try and teach in different ways. If I wasn’t getting it in a certain way is was kind of like, ‘She not gonna go for this route and we’re not going to try a different route’”.
Janet’s tone implied a sense of defeat, like teachers gave up on her. Nancy started high school with excellent grades but suffered from a major life event causing her grades to slip. Due to the large size of her school, she was only able to meet with her high school counselor twice a year and did not receive the support she needed to pull her grades back up. Once Nancy met with her counselor, they told her she would never get into a four-year college and if she did, she would never make it. For Ruth, although she received accommodations for her disability, she recognized once in college how under-prepared she was for college in comparison to her peers.

In addition to the pre-college support categories, all participants cited low ACT scores as a potential obstacle for college admission. Consequently, they were concerned about acceptance into college and their ability to receive financial aid and scholarships to assist them financially.

Lack of support during their K-12 experience was not the only factor that influenced the participants’ transition to and persistence through college. In addition to the lack of pre-college support from their high schools, participants also faced obstacles from their own families in their pursuit of a college education.

**Family influence.** Unfortunately, some of the participants did not receive support from their families, which negatively influenced their ability to focus on their studies. Patti shared that she and her mom experienced food and housing insecurities during her years in high school resulting in her needing to obtain a job and attend as many extra-curricular events as possible in hopes that food would be provided at the events. Her financial situation and the fact that English was her second language hindered her ability to meet her potential in high school. Her mother could not understand why she wanted to go to college. Patti reflected on a statement from her mother, in which she said, “college is very expensive and you’re going to be in debt. Why not just get married with these wealthy men? They are offering you everything. Maybe you’ll get
married and then you can go to school with their support.” This illustrates the family cultural expectations Patti also had to battle in addition to the other obstacles she faced. Her mother strongly discouraged college and highly encouraged marriage; Patti stated, “in our family, you have to get married ASAP. My grandma got married when she was 14, my mom at 17, and so when I turned 18 they told me I had to get married.” Patti chose college and lost her mother’s support as a result.

Eleanor indicated she did not apply herself in school because she did not have an adult role model who had done well in school. Her mother had Eleanor at a young age and did not complete high school herself. When Eleanor completed her first year of high school, her parents and grandparents indicated they desired something different for her. She shared, “originally my grandfather suggested I start out at a two-year school to save money, but my College Possible coach encouraged a four-year degree.” Later, when reflecting back on her college experience, she wished she had listened to her own instincts because she still felt a two-year degree would have been a better option and likely would have resulted in a completed college degree. Sometimes, family support of a four-year degree can negatively influence college completion resulting in the lack of the right kind of support for at-risk students.

Although family support had an influence on college success, personal motivation stood out as a strong indicator of college persistence. If a student lacked the motivation to be in college, they likely did not persist to graduation. The next section shares some of the analysis of the students who did not persist to graduation based on their lack of personal motivation to be in college.

**Lack of personal motivation.** Personal motivation of the participants influenced their persistence and seemed to be the defining factor between those who persisted to graduation and
those who did not graduate from college. Bernice admitted she did not do well in college because she lacked motivation to be there. She shared, “I wasn’t trying as hard, because I never wanted to be there, but it wasn’t really my choice to be there [in college].” Although Catherine did not graduate from college, she shared a piece of advice to incoming students:

Work as hard as you can, don’t give up. It’s going to get really tough, there’s going to be nights where you have to stay up all night and study but it’s going to be worth it because you want to pass your exams, and you want to understand the material…you have to try, you have to want to learn. Sometimes you’re going to have to learn by yourself and try to study in groups.

It was as if Catherine had time to reflect on her own experience, and through that reflection wanted to project motivation on to incoming students, the motivation she herself lacked while in college. Like personal motivation, financial obstacles also influenced both groups of participants, those who graduated from college and those who did not complete their degree. In fact, personal motivation often influenced the participants to overcome their financial concerns.

**Financial obstacles.** I asked participants what obstacles they faced both in transition to and throughout their college experience. Almost all of the participants in this study indicated some sort of financial concerns. Patti looks back at her college experience and is amazed at her own personal motivation to graduate in four years. Having experienced housing and food insecurities in high school, she knew that affording a college degree would be a challenge. With no familial financial support, at one point she worked four jobs to pay her own way through college. She shared, “I couldn’t afford to spend five hours an evening doing homework because I had to work to pay my college bills.” As a result, she experienced a slight decline in her grades. Finances were so difficult for Patti during her second year of college, the institution sent
her tuition balance to collections. She remembers calling home to her mom and crying, “I can’t pay this bill. It’s very big and I think I am going to have to leave college.” Not receiving support from her parents fueled Patti’s motivation to persist. She reflected on this experience and wished she could have just focused on her grades instead of her financial difficulties, but she did what she had to do to earn her college degree. Janet indicated her financial situation was so significant, it limited the number of schools to which she applied because of the cost of the application process. Instead of applying to her dream colleges, she focused on schools to which she knew she could gain acceptance. She stated:

A lot of schools that I was thinking I might want to go to, I ended up not applying to just because it costs money to apply to colleges and it costs money to send your transcripts to colleges. There was just a lot of money factors that went into it [college application choices].

Janet knew she had to work while in college and was worried about balancing her priorities. The cost of college was the main obstacle in degree completion for Janet. She shared, “towards the end my parents were not helping out as much, so I had to take out more loans and that was a really scary thing for me.” Eventually, Janet made some significant choices to take out more loans, move off campus and commute from home to save money.

Catherine shared that finances were the reason for her early departure from college. She said, “Back home my family needed help economically. If they needed help economically, I couldn’t pay for school.” She received scholarships, but the scholarships did not provide enough to pay her tuition. Catherine ended up paying out of pocket until, according to her, “it just wasn’t possible for me to do it anymore.” Financial concerns can impact a student who has made it to their senior year. Nancy took out loans every year but in the final year of school her
mom would not co-sign for any more loans. She shared, “I can’t take out another loan so I ended up taking on more jobs and more jobs so I could pay out of pocket for school.” Not only was she concerned about paying for college, but she also had post-graduation expenses to consider, stating, “it hit me: I not only have to pay for college; I have to save money for my licensure tests and housing after college.” Having the finances available for the licensure tests is necessary to acquire a job and start repaying college loans.

Elsie was very concerned about paying for college because her parents are farmers. Even though they were living paycheck-to-paycheck, their land was considered a significant asset in the financial aid calculations. She shared, “we farm, so we don’t make a lot of money. My parents have no money set aside to give to me. I mean, they would want more than anything to do that, but they can’t.” Even taking out loans was difficult for Elsie’s family. Elsie shared, My parents opted to take out a loan to help me in the first year, but then they couldn’t because it was affecting the farm and their ability to take out loans for the farm. I had to make a verbal agreement with my family that I would pay back the loan they did take out.

After her acceptance to this institution, she took the ACT one more time to try to qualify for more scholarships which demonstrates her motivation to overcome the financial obstacles she faced. Elsie indicated that finances were a significant concern for her and her college completion. Financial aid does not cover summer classes, and when she had to re-take two courses over the summer, she had to take on extra work to pay for those courses out-of-pocket. She knew this was her only option because not completing college in four years meant her aid would decrease significantly in year five. Elsie shared, “it was super important for me to graduate in four years for myself and for financial reasons because I knew I would not be able to afford a fifth year.” She was worried her inability to stay on track would result in a fifth year of
Persistence of At-Risk Students

college and a significant decrease in financial aid during that fifth year of college. Instead, she took on 16-hour over-night shifts as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) to earn the extra money she needed. Her personal motivation helped her persist during this difficult time. She shared “I don’t want to be a CNA for the rest of my life for $11 an hour; my parents have always wanted more for us.” Elsie’s sentiments illustrate the desire for a career that could elevate her family to a higher income bracket. The tone in her voice reflected a desire to gain a level of financial stability which goes beyond the living paycheck-to-paycheck reality experienced by her parents.

Unfortunately, for Ruth, the federal financial aid rules combined with her personal financial concerns did not positively support her as a student with a disability. In Ruth’s case, she knew that she needed to take a full course load of 12 credits minimum to meet federal financial aid requirements and retain her financial aid. She shared,

I just had finances always on my mind. I was always stressed out about how much debt I was accumulating. I had a really hard time focusing on three classes, it was just too much for my brain to absorb with completely new material and had to look up a lot of different words.

Ruth has dyslexia. In her case, a modified course load might have contributed to her academic success. Instead, given her need to retain the financial aid, she overextended herself and did poorly in school.

Outside factors can influence financial stability to pay for college. Emma shared, “in the middle of my first semester, the economy took a dive so paying for college became an issue. At the same time, I was questioning what I wanted to do with my life.” The combination of the two factors influenced her decision to discontinue her education. Martha entered college with financial insecurities. “I wasn’t sure, because of my low GPA, If I was going to get any
scholarships. I didn’t know because of my dad’s health issues if I was going to be able to afford it.” Unexpected economic and family situations can dramatically change a family’s financial picture and their ability to pay for college.

Finances play a significant role in college completion and college success. The financial aid regulations, the need to work, and the self-awareness of balancing workload and other priorities presents a struggle for many at-risk students. To complicate factors, many at-risk students are also first-generation students. Ten of the participants in this study are considered first-generation college students, which they identified as another obstacle to degree completion.

**First-generation status.** As the first students from their families to attend college, first-generation college students have unique challenges in pursuing a higher education. Sabrina summed up well the feelings of many first-generation college students stating, “You can talk to your family, but sometimes they don’t always get the college experience. They don’t get that you’re tired, and you’re emotional.” Sabrina was trying to convey that when demands require a student’s attention at home, parents of first-generation college students do not often understand the stress college students experience with that factor alone. Balancing school, personal needs, and priorities at home can hinder a student’s ability to be academically successful.

For first-generation students, families do not understand the workload of college and often do not understand the need to navigate college differently than the K-12 experience. In addition, parents of first-generation college students, given their desire for their students to have a better life, often hold their students to unrealistic expectations. The burden of the high expectations parents had of their college student was evident in responses from participants. The participants wanted to meet those expectations but often obstacles got in their way. In addition, parents who might want their students to become a nurse because it is a good career, may not
understand that their students need to do well in science to be a nurse. Parents’ limited knowledge of career options often limits what careers they allow their students to pursue. Sabrina shared that she watched many of her friends do poorly in college, end up on probation, and eventually leave college because they ended up on financial aid probation all because they were in the wrong major from the beginning of their college career. She felt most parents do not understand the career options available for their student. Catherine shared she wished there was an opportunity for her parents to “hear from college students who have already graduated to talk to them about the experience, why it is important to go to college, and how college works.” She continued with, “a lot of parents, at least for my culture, don’t really understand how important it [college] is.” Although many of these family characteristics influenced college success, participants had a lot to say about their college classroom experiences as a factor in their college outcome, which leads to the final sub-theme in the obstacles to degree completion section of my analysis: curriculum delivery.

**Curriculum delivery.** All participants in this study gave definite feedback on teaching styles that did not work well for them. The primary concern was the lecture, or what Freire (1974) refers to as the “transfer of knowledge” style of teaching. All 13 participants shared their disdain for PowerPoint because they did not feel the lecture and PowerPoint style of teaching helped them learn the content of the course. Sabrina described her classroom setting experience as boring. She shared, “I need something that will get me the education but will challenge the way I learn. I’ve done internships and study abroad experiences because my brain learns more effectively with hands-on experiences.” She continued with, “I don’t like sitting in school. I like learning, but I spent four years at [the institution] and I think I have learned more from my study abroad and off-campus experiences because my brain absorbs it differently.” Sabrina’s auditory
processing disorder proves challenging in the classroom and it concerns her that the faculty do not think she is taking notes as they speak. She stated:

I won’t take notes because I can only do one or the other. I can either listen or take notes.

I can’t do both, and I explain this to professors. I am in class, I am paying attention, but the way I do it is different than everybody else.

In this quote, Sabrina is trying to illustrate the diverse needs of students in the classroom and the inability of faculty to recognize her needs.

Many students today manage their disabilities and can access college, which requires faculty to adapt to the diverse needs of students. Sabrina shared:

I think professors have to understand the way they teach and how students adapt to it.

Sometimes professors are like “I’ve got my PhD. I’ve earned this. This is the way I teach,” and then it doesn’t work for students. They see students failing, but they don’t want to change their ways.

Sabrina continued with this sentiment, stating what she senses her faculty are thinking, and illustrating the power faculty have in the classroom. She stated that she perceives faculty to think.

Yeah, this is lecture. I’m gonna talk for an hour because I’m the person that spent all those years in school, spent all that money, and I have the right, and this is my place.”

That is great, but I’m not walking out here knowing anything more than I walked in with.

At times, I learned a lot, but I didn’t learn what they thought was important to teach me.

Sabrina wants faculty to realize that students learn best in different ways, “I think for professors, it’s really understanding the changing world of first-generation students.” The teaching learning process is often very cyclical in nature and Sabrina recognized this as she stated, “you teach the
way you were taught” unfortunately, “this is the way things were taught, but this is no longer working.” Again, Sabrina illustrates the need for changes within higher education and the need for faculty to teach differently to meet the needs of the diverse student population now attending college. She continued her point by stating,

You are hearing a subject that is [taught] predominantly from the White perspective and your lived experience is opposite of the experience of that teacher. I think it becomes a problem because you see the way they teach, and you realize this does not work for me, but you feel uncomfortable telling the professor.

Here, Sabrina is highlighting the differences between the traditional way of teaching, which has been historically effective for the dominant culture and the need to adapt teaching styles to better meet the needs of a diverse student population. She continued with, “it’s like they have their way of teaching, they know what they want, and they’ll teach us something, but they don’t want to adapt, and they don’t really see that they need to change with the students’ demands.” Indeed faculty, particularly those who have a long teaching career, can become comfortable with their historical teaching style and are often unwilling to see the need for change to help the current student population in their academic success. In this vein, Nancy added:

The classes that were a lot harder for me, were the ones that you sit there, and you listen to the professor lecture and lecture and that’s it. They’ll read out of the book and say, “all right, any questions?” and then read back in the book. There’s not many in-class assignments or in-class discussions and it’s all large point papers and you just have to get through them. Those are the harder classes for me because I am not able to get what I want out of them. I can’t handle 40 minutes of straight lecturing.
Nancy clearly needed more interaction in the classroom between the faculty teaching the course and the students trying to learn the content through in-class activities and projects. Mary reinforced this concern when she shared, “I feel like the classes that I didn’t do well on were classes that did not include participation. It was more lecture-based and not really discussion-based. It just wasn’t as interesting or exciting.” Sabrina shared more examples of this style of teaching:

[An instructor might say] “This is East Asia. Here’s a PowerPoint. I’ll explain East Asia History,” and you’re like, “I have no background in this,” and you’re expected to retain this whole world of knowledge and understand concepts that you have never learned before.

The participants unanimously illustrated the difficulty learning the course content from a straight lecture format. Bernice echoed her dislike of PowerPoints and shared:

PowerPoints, I hate PowerPoints, because all it is is an outlet for a professor to stand in the front of the classroom, speak in a monotone voice and click through slides that he had probably had for years. It was excruciating.

This point reinforces the belief that faculty get stuck in the cycle of teaching the same content in the same format which does not meet the needs of current students. Catherine shared her experience with PowerPoint in a psychology class:

She [the faculty member] would just read everything off the PowerPoint, I’d be like, “Well this isn’t really helping me, I could do that.” I wanted her to explain her point of view so that we could take notes on things the PowerPoint didn’t say. Show me diagrams. Don’t just read to me. Show me or explain it to me in your thoughts so that I can have a better understanding of what you’re talking about.
Catherine expressed a desire for a more diverse form of curriculum delivery to engage and grasp the topic. Inez echoed these sentiments with, “classes that just read through PowerPoint, write your notes, and if you have questions raise your hand. But no one wanted to be the person to ask questions. Those classes were tough for me.” This illustrates the barrier that still exists between the faculty member in the position of perceived power and the student who is afraid to make mistakes in front of the person in power, further underscoring the need to engage the students in a different learning format.

Elsie had a very interesting experience with taking two courses more than once, first taught in a traditional lecture format and the second time with a more transformative approach to teaching and learning. During the academic year she took anatomy and chemistry. They were both very lecture-based. She shared,

My chemistry teacher and my anatomy teacher both talked so fast and just clicked through their PowerPoints that I didn’t even have an opportunity to write half of it down. I am not a listener-learner. I need to write it down. I need to see visuals; I need to have someone repeat it to me. I can’t just listen to someone talk and then understand everything afterwards. I cried a lot because it was super hard.

Unfortunately, Elsie did not earn high enough grades to satisfy her program of study and had to re-take both chemistry and anatomy in the summer. She described this experience very differently. She was learning the same content and the same materials, just with a different teaching style. Her summer anatomy class would give hand-outs, and the instructor would go over the materials with the students in class together. The instructor and the students together would take the necessary notes for the class, role modeling mutual learning between the faculty
member and the students. This structure allowed the students to understand what the faculty member thought was the most important content within the materials. Elsie shared,

We would then go back and review it again at the end of class. Then, in the lab, he would interact with us in the classroom and would explain good ways to remember the body parts. He would randomly walk around the room and quiz us, but he didn’t make us feel dumb if we didn’t know it.

Elsie illustrated how the content was reinforced throughout the class-period, reviewed before class ended and incorporated into the lab learning experience. Her summer chemistry instructor also used a different teaching style. Elsie described,

She did use PowerPoints, but she was super great at explaining equations and what things meant. She did a lot of writing on the board and utilized hand-outs. She gave us time in class to do our homework, so if you had questions, she’d walk around and answer them.

Elsie described a flipped classroom style of learning where students have the opportunity to work on homework while in class so that faculty member can be readily available to assist and answer questions. She said taking both of these courses in the summer was hard, but the two teachers made it easier and she earned As in both courses. When comparing the instructor’s, she shared that it seemed like her summer instructors “cared more.”

All participants seemed to desire a sense of care from their faculty. Elsie shared, “I felt like my anatomy teacher did not care. We’re all paying for the class. It was his way or no way.” Ruth had a similar experience in anatomy, stating “it was a long lecture where you just sat there the whole time and just absorbed all the information. There wasn’t too much hands-on activities to learn besides the lab.” This desire for care from the faculty shows up significantly in both sections of this chapter. When participants felt like faculty had concern for their success,
participants identified this as a supportive factor that contributed to students’ persistence; contrastingly, participants identified a lack of faculty support as an obstacle that impeded their persistence.

It is clear the participants involved in this study expect a different classroom experience than the traditional format to which so many students have become accustomed to in higher education. This, along with the many support initiatives in place could have a dramatic effect on the graduation outcomes of not only at-risk students, but also all students attempting to earn a college degree. In the next section, I illustrate support systems currently in place identified within the data as initiatives participants felt supported their degree completion.

**Degree Completion Support**

Although students shared many obstacles they faced in their pursuit of a college degree, they also discussed programs, systems, and examples of people who did support their academic success. This section highlights those experiences, which can help inform educators about support systems that do work for at-risk students, organized into the following subthemes: pre-college support, family influence, personal motivation, peer mentorship, LEAP/Emerging Scholars Living-Learning Community, faculty and staff support and curriculum delivery. Although the participants experienced varied levels of support as they approached college, those who had some level of pre-college support encountered encouragement to attend college.

**Pre-college support.** Although only five participants described a purely positive pre-college experience, all participants could name at least one person in their high school or pre-college programs who served as a source of support even though many teachers and leaders discouraged them from attending college. Sabrina shared she realized she could do well in college after pursuing some college-level courses on her own at a local community college. She shared, “the staff at the community college were far more supportive than the teachers and
administrators in my high school.” This example illustrates how community colleges can be equipped to support students where they are, as well as the potential lack of resources available to U.S. K-12 institutions to properly support students in their academic pursuits.

Patti, Catherine, Inez, Mary, and Eleanor, all indicated programs like AVID, College Possible, Upward Bound, and TRIO contributed to their ability to enter college. In fact, Eleanor indicated she had been falling asleep in class and not doing homework until she became involved in College Possible, which she credits with turning her academic experience around. Many participants, however, also indicated that although these programs helped them prepare for college admittance, the programs did not properly prepare them for success while in college.

A number of participants shared explicit examples of the importance of pre-college support. Although her personal counselor discouraged Nancy from applying to a four-year school, her high school biology teacher was supportive and encouraged her to apply. Nancy recalls her teacher sternly sitting her down and stating, “you are better than you think; you need to go to school and you need to do this.” Although Mary grew up in a small, low-income community, her school was able to provide a lot of support and resources because the principal worked diligently to find outside resources to supplement the inadequate funding from the state. Elsie shared that although her high school counselor was not initially supportive of her pursuit of a four-year degree, her biology teacher recognized her love of the sciences and anatomy and influenced her choice to pursue health care after high school. Reflecting on this conversation she remembers her teacher stating “I think you would be really good at this. I think you’d be excellent in any health care setting.” Ruth shared that although she attended a large school system, the accommodations for her dyslexia allowed for her to learn in smaller classroom settings which helped her do well. She was also able to take fewer credits which allowed her to
better focus on the classes in which she was enrolled. Emma also indicated her small classroom setting contributed to her high school academic success despite her diagnosed dyslexia.

In addition to pre-college support, family influence also played a significant role in college attendance for the participants. Many students shared that their families wanted a different life for their children. Parents that struggled to make ends meet recognized how a college education could change that outcome for their own children.

**Family influence.** As highlighted in the first section of my findings chapter, family had a significant influence on each of these students and their consideration to attend and remain in college. Although the stories shared in the obstacles section focused on the family as an hinderance to persistence, in many cases, family had a positive influence on degree completion. Sabrina shared despite her disability, her mother always supported her desire to go to college, stating, “My mom, because she had the opportunity to go to college herself, but she never finished, knew that if her kids wanted it, she’d be there to support us.” Almost all the participants indicated their parents expressed a strong desire for them to attend college. Emma shared, “I was pretty much raised on the fact that I was going to go to college.” Most parents had not attended college themselves and wanted something different for their children. For Elsie, this desire for her to attend college stemmed back to her grandparents. Elsie shared, “My grandparents set aside money for us because they wanted nothing more than for us to go to school.” In most cases, this motivated the participants to make it into college and do well.

For participants who had parents with college degrees, college after high school was just an expectation. Janet stated, “it was always just kind of understood that I would attend college after I graduated from high school.” When Bernice was concerned about her inability to receive acceptance to college due to a major life experience, her father encouraged her to attach a letter
to her application to “explain what had happened in high school and how my grades miraculously got better.” Nancy indicated she had no desire to go to college after several major life events. These feelings were reinforced when her father passed away feeling an obligation to take care of her mother, but her mother disagreed so Nancy went to college. Elsie did not let her high school counselor influence her decision to attend a four-year college. Her parents and grandparents were farmers living paycheck to paycheck and wanted something more for Elsie. She could not let her family down.

Family clearly influenced a participants’ college pursuits and college success and also influenced their personal motivation, both positively and negatively. Consequently, personal motivation also emerged as a factor contributing to the persistence of the participants in this study.

**Personal motivation.** Personal motivation emerged as a prominent theme both when sharing their desire to get accepted to college and to complete their college degrees. The participants’ own personal motivation stood out as a significant contributor to their college success in addition to the support they received from high school or college support systems. Sabrina recognized she needed a science course to be considered for college acceptance and stated, “I really didn’t have any science until I did a program, a health course program, because I needed a science and they were not helping me [get a science course] at my high school.” Although her high school did not guide her to take the courses appropriate for college admission due to her learning disability, she went out on her own and attended a local community college to gain college-level credits for her final two years of high school. She knew she was interested in pursuing a history major so she enrolled in several history courses as well and stated, “I was able to take history and a lot of my basic generals that I could transfer later to university.” Sabrina
relied on the two years of community college experience to speak for some of her other deficiencies, like her Math and Science ACT scores, to aid in her admittance to college. Sabrina shared,

I am not a test taker. Tests give me anxiety. I didn’t really understand what the SAT really was or what they wanted from me. With the ACT they wanted math and science and I only took one year of science and that was a basic high school class and it had been over a year since I had taken a math.

This example demonstrates the lack of support those who are not considered “college bound” by K-12 educators receive as they prepare for college. Most college bound students are well informed of the expectations of college entrance exams. Cleary Sabrina had the interest and the motivation to pursue college but did not have the tools to do well on the entrance exams. She went on to share, “if they [colleges] are going to rely on testing and GPA as a reflection of what I had to offer, I was not the greatest candidate, I didn’t have much to offer.” Her love of history kept her going and she shared “I only knew I wanted to study history because I loved it and I knew I needed somewhere to go so I just applied to a bunch of places.” Her personal motivation did not allow her test scores and her GPA to get in the way of her desire for a college education.

She shared that she did not have a top five list of schools in mind. Instead, she stated, “I just want to go to college, to get in somewhere and like the college.” Once in college at the site of this study, Sabrina did struggle in her first year, but sought support and developed an academic plan that combined courses that best met her learning style with a year abroad “gaining hands on, in-person learning.” During this time, Sabrina described,

I wanted to quit; I just had such a rough time. I had roommate problems and I was not coping well...but, I figured out that you either stay or you quit, if you stay, you change
what is going on … I didn’t want to give up on college. I wanted to finish my degree because I knew how important my degree would be for me later in my life.

She went on to share, “I don’t want to let those people [high school teachers] and their perceptions of me [to be true] and I wanted to be a voice for other students who face this, ‘You’re not enough; you’ll never be good enough; you’re not the ideal student.’” Sabrina shared that she did get a lot of Cs in college and often questioned why she could not receive As like her peers and this often got her down. However, as she reflected on this experience, she stated, “they need to realize who you are as a person and what your strengths are.” This quote sends a message that there is more to a person than the grades they received in college. She concluded by sharing, “having a strong motivation to finish [college helped] because I don’t think I would have finished if I didn’t have that.” Sabrina’s quote is a strong reminder to educators that a student’s ability to get accepted and persist through college is not predictable based on grades and test scores alone. If a student has a strong desire to finish college, their own personal motivation can significantly influence their ability to complete a degree.

Other participants also discussed the importance of personal motivation as a contributor to their persistence in college. Catherine expressed a similar motivation to attend college. She shared, “it was something I always wanted to do. I always wanted to finish school; I wanted to be the first generation of my family to attend college and get a degree.” Mary shared,

It [college] was always something I wanted to do…a lot of my family members, like my mom didn’t go to school, my dad didn’t, so it was something that I wanted to change, and my teachers told us that education was important.
Eleanor also shared a similar motivation. Not only was she the first in her family to graduate from high school; she also wanted to be the first one in her family to go to and graduate from college.

Patti, struggling with finances, transportation, housing and food insecurities, knew she needed to save money for college and to support her family. To accomplish this, she got a job at her high school as a custodian. As soon as she finished school for the day, she started work. She described this as difficult as she watched her peers go to practices, games and other after-school activities while she cleaned up after them. Between classes and work, she spent time tracking down teachers to assist her with class content. She claimed she went to teachers and requested, “help me with this assignment because I cannot afford to have bad grades.” This motivation continued through college. Although her mother would not support her financially or emotionally because Patti challenged the cultural norm of early marriage, she was determined to do well in college and serve as a role model of a different path for other young women in her culture. She shared, “I wanted to do a different route. I know once you get married, you start having kids. Kids come into your life and you have to take care of them, and that is a big responsibility. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to [raise kids and attend school].” Unlike her peers, whose family influence to attend college was “a must,” her desire to attend college was “a wish.” Patti shared,

For me, it was a desire to go higher and just break that cultural constraint of marriage and I just wanted to be different. I don’t want to have kids. I know it will come eventually, but just not now. Give me time. I am young, and I have a lot to give.”
Patti graduated in four years while working numerous jobs to afford her education on her own. The obstacles Patti faced in obtaining a college degree again illustrate to educators that personal motivation is a significant factor in a student’s ability to persist through college.

Inez indicated she struggled with motivation because she did not do well her first semester, which was coupled by the fact that her family was so far away. These factors affected her motivation “to do school.” After her first year in college, she acknowledged she had a shift in mindset and determined that she too could earn good grades and graduate on time. She shared, “I knew it was going to be trickier and a little harder,” but she had the determination needed to persist. She reflected that her last year in college was very hard, stating, “I took two summer classes right before fall, and then I took four classes [in the fall], and then I took two January-term classes.” Taking two January classes involves a significant amount of effort on the part of the student, because this format involves taking a semester’s worth of course content in less than a month. Students must have strong focus and spend a significant amount of time on one class during this term in order to succeed. Inez shared “It was either that, or I’d have to do another semester.” In addition, she took 20 credits the spring semester of her senior year, significantly more than the generally advised 12-16 credits. Nancy shared a similar start to her college career, but her father, who passed away while she was in high school, really wanted her to attend and graduate from college. She struggled when she needed to balance the needs of her mom and her academic needs. She indicated that she “had to change my mindset a little bit, because I had a goal I wanted to achieve.” Nancy’s personal motivation to complete a college degree influenced her ability to shift her priorities just slightly to manage the demands of college and family responsibilities. Nancy’s willingness to shift her priorities to completing college
allowed her to persist to graduation, graduate on time, and shift her focus back to her family more quickly.

After watching her parents struggle to pay the bills, Elsie wanted a better life for herself. She worked hard in high school, asking for extra help when she did not understand course content. Elsie shared,

my counselor wanted me to go to a community college even though I decided I wanted to go to a university, but that wasn’t an option because my parents didn’t go to school. None of my grandparents went to school. It was a big deal for my family to go to a four-year school.

She indicated, “I didn’t want to struggle…my parents had a good life, but they do struggle every day with paying their bills.” She admits she had to take her ACT test five times to get a score she thought might get her into the site of this study. Although she struggled financially, she was willing to invest in the ACT test to ensure a different outcome for her future. After receiving her acceptance letter, she took the ACT one more time to secure more scholarships funds. Taking the ACT felt like playing the lottery for Elsie. She invested in that ACT score with the hope of a better life, but she did not know if the investment would result in the “winning ticket,” to admission to college. Like Inez, Elsie struggled at first. She did, at the expense of social connections, make the Dean’s list her first semester in college. She was so scared of failure that she spent her entire time studying, visiting the academic support center, and meeting with tutors. She stated, “I didn’t have a really big social life first semester. I kind of just sat in my room, did my homework, went to the academic support center, and went to tutors.” Her second semester did not go as well. Despite her academic advisor’s warning, she took microbiology, anatomy, and a difficult speech class in the same semester. Ultimately, she did not receive the grades
required of the respiratory care program. Determined to do well and graduate in four years, over the summer she not only took on a 16-hour over-night shift CNA job, but also re-took anatomy and chemistry, paying out of her own pocket because she did not qualify for financial aid over the summer. Her personal motivation to finish college in four years was evident in her actions.

Personal motivation clearly played a significant role in a students’ persistence to graduation, participants who persisted to college graduation were asked what contributed to their success. Ironically, even students who did not persist to graduation highlighted support systems contributing to their success while they were in college. The next section of the degree completion support section highlights systems in place that assisted participants in their transition to college and their persistence to college graduation.

**Peer mentorship.** Most of the participants in this study mentioned some type of peer mentor who contributed to their success, whether an upper-class tutor, a Resident Advisor, or a study advocate assigned to the LEAP students living on the Emerging Scholars floor. Each mentioned how helpful it was to have an upper-class peer, particularly from their major, to ask questions and learn study tips to better grasp the academic content of their courses. Sabrina shared she was grateful to be paired with an upper-class student of color through the multicultural student services office on campus, stating, “I had no idea about college,” and the ability to have a resource who had been through the transition to college was very helpful. Nancy reflected on her college transition experience and indicated that “having a student mentor my first year really helped me because my mentor had the same major as I did.” Her mentor served as an idol and someone to look up to because she had accomplished what Nancy hoped to accomplish in her future. Elsie also acknowledged the upper-class student tutors hired to support her major. The tutor taught her a way to remember the course materials that better met the needs
of Elsie’s learning style and also explained the material better than her actual professor. Elsie also acknowledged her Resident Adviser, who helped her register for classes and checked in on her frequently to see how she was doing in her science classes and to help her with her statistics. This kind of support also contributed to the success of the students who participated in the LEAP program and the Emerging Scholars Living-Learning Community.

**LEAP/Emerging Scholars Living-Learning Community.** Most of the participants expressed their initial embarrassment when they received acceptance to college through a special program designed for students who may need extra support. Despite this initial disappointment, they realized as they looked back the value of the support they received. Sabrina was very active on the Emerging Scholars floor, a Living-Learning Community designed specifically for LEAP students. She reflected, “I don’t think I would have continued my academic career without LEAP.” She went on to say that “having a school program that says ‘we’re willing to help you’ and they show that even though you’re not the ideal person [student] on paper, that there is something with you that’s gonna be great in school” was very helpful. Patti admitted she did not attend many of the events held by LEAP or Emerging Scholars, but she “developed life-long friendships” with other students on the floor. Janet indicated the required writing course for LEAP students gave her peace of mind when she recognized the number of other students who also needed the assistance. It also helped her understand “I just need to put in this extra work for it [writing] to be college level,” the course provided “a really good base for all other classes.” Bernice was quite blunt about her LEAP acceptance experience. When she read her letter, her reaction was, “so I’m accepted to the stupid kids’ program.” She shared that she just wanted “to be normal,” but later reflected, “I needed it [LEAP]…but I didn’t want to accept that I needed it.” Catherine shared the LEAP program helped her get organized and transition into the college
experience. Inez indicated the “required writing course for LEAP students was helpful,” and she enjoyed the fact that “the people who were in that class also lived on the same floor.” However, she also shared she wished the support of the program would have gone past the first year.

Nancy was hesitant at first about her acceptance into the LEAP program, but at the summer overnight specifically for LEAP students leading up to her first year, she realized

this is literally going to benefit me more than I thought. It’s going to make sure I have the resources in place so I can be successful. It’s going to make sure I’m on the right track so I can graduate without giving up

on her college career. She enjoyed the comradery of the LEAP program and the Emerging Scholars floor and shared, “If I didn’t live on that floor and I wasn’t a part of that program, I don’t think I would be here today. I think I would have just given up because I didn’t have that motivation and excitement in my first year.” Knowing the peers on her floor and that the peers in two of her courses struggled with similar issues in high school and in their transition to college, “kept my motivation going and my excitement up.” She also recognized she “had the support from the faculty, staff and LEAP that pushed me towards where I needed to be.” Nancy later returned this support to LEAP students by serving as a Study Advocate Mentor for three years on the Emerging Scholars floor. Mary claimed, “LEAP helped us,” citing programs like money management and the study advocates as sources of support. Elsie was not thrilled initially with the LEAP designation but admits she went to everything put on by the LEAP program and the Emerging Scholars floor, sharing, “If I’m going to be in this program, I’m going to let it benefit me.” Not only did it benefit her, but she went on to share the skills she learned with other Emerging Scholars residents by serving as a Study Advocate for the floor in her senior year. As a student of color, Eleanor enjoyed the classes she shared with other LEAP students
because they were the most diverse classes she participated in and more closely resembled her high school experience. Emma reflected on her LEAP experience and admitted “I didn’t quite understand why they were doing these things and why they only started me out with three classes. I wasn’t even taking classes that would support my major. After going through what I have gone through, I’m much more appreciative and understand why they did a lot of stuff. They were trying to set us up for success.” Martha admitted that she did not attend the programs provided by LEAP or the Emerging Scholars program. The only facet of the program she recalled was the shared experience in their The Reflective Woman (TRW) course, a course required of all first year students with designated LEAP sections.

Programs like LEAP and Emerging Scholars can have a positive influence on persistence for at-risk students. Whether students participate in programs or not, faculty and staff support can also have an influence on college persistence.

**Faculty and staff support.** Faculty and staff who understand the unique nature of at-risk students can significantly influence the degree completion outcomes for these students. Sabrina credits the support from the disabilities services office, multicultural student services, and the counseling center as support systems that influenced her college success. The disabilities services “offered options such as a smart pen for note-taking, a note-taker and a private space in their office to takes tests.” She shared, “you can talk to the multicultural student services office about things that you may not always share with your professors or your family,” and the counseling center provided a confidential location to “tell them things that I didn’t normally tell to other people.” Patti credits the support she received from her faculty for her degree completion. Even though she continued to struggle with the cultural marital expectations, her faculty cheered her on and said, “you can go far; you do not need to settle for marriage, and you
can break the cultural cycle of marriage at a young age.” She knew she did not have the support of her parents, so this faculty support was very meaningful to her. Janet appreciated the patience of her professors, and compared her experience with the professors at the site of this study with professors at a nearby college where she also took courses. The instructors at the site of the study “would always slow down if one person wasn’t fully there with the rest of the class.” In contrast, Janet perceived the faculty at the other institution insinuated, “this is the pace of the class and if you can’t keep up, you can’t keep up.” Inez recognized soccer and the soccer coach as the support she needed to remain in school. The coach “required a high GPA from all of us.” Even though Inez did not achieve that goal, this expectation made her work hard, and she likely ended up with a higher GPA as a result. Nancy cites the faculty and staff associated with the LEAP program as a reason for her academic success. She stated, “even after the first year, you still see the faculty and the staff, and they always continue to push you until you get to where you need to be.” Mary recognized her faculty and the counseling center for supporting her through her depression. Mary shared,

I wasn’t attending classes and did not feel like getting out of bed…I just felt completely bad. I went and tried to get the help that I needed because I wanted to get better. I used that resource as much as possible and professors were very helpful and understanding.

Elsie reflected on a college professor who contributed to her academic success. If Elsie did not do well on a test, this professor would write a note on her test encouraging her to stop by to get some study skills tips for the content she was not comprehending. Elsie also credited her financial aid counselor who helped her optimize her financial aid. Emma indicated she chose to attend the site of this study because of the staff person in the disability services office with whom she worked. Elsie state, “They were very helpful and supportive, but by the time I started
college, that person left and I didn’t get the same feeling from the staff as when I was applying.” Emma’s quote reminds educators the value of strong support for the diverse student population attending college.

The findings in this section demonstrate the importance of college support systems in place designed to assist with the persistence of students, especially at-risk students. Often, supportive faculty also took the form of willingness to meet the needs of the students both inside and outside of the classroom. This leads to the final sub-theme of my findings on degree completion support.

**Curriculum delivery.** Participants were asked to identify what practices faculty and staff can implement to assist students to overcome obstacles and be more successful in college. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on their classroom experiences to identify teaching styles that contributed to successful classroom learning and those that did not support their learning. Curriculum delivery arose as the final dominant theme in degree completion support. All participants could identify exactly what they needed from their instructors to be the most successful in the classroom. They identified classroom set-up and the ability to connect with their faculty members as an opportunity to overcome academic obstacles. Sabrina shared that she thrived in discussion-based classes. “I really like professors who try to make class interactive and try to engage students mentally. Discussion-based classes allowed the students to communicate their ideas with one another and with the teacher.” She continued, “tests don’t always show a student’s ability. They show that you can take a test, and you can pass. It’s great for some, but not for everybody.” With this quote, Sabrina illustrates that in a discussion-based class, students feel free to learn the material relevant to their interests, not purely what the faculty member thinks is important to learn. Patti also enjoyed her discussion-based classes, “because I
can share my experiences, the little details.” She felt her classes were good if “the professor was willing to open themselves and to teach,” indicating that developing a connection with the faculty member was important to her. Patti reflected “I would have loved a stronger relationship” with her faculty. Janet echoed this sentiment and shared she desired a classroom where the faculty “created a really open environment where they connect with students one-on-one and make sure everyone’s opinion is included and able to speak their truth.” Bernice shared a story of a professor who did this very well, stating, “She doesn’t teach out of books and everyone sits in a semi-circle and it’s always discussion-based.” She expressed a desire for more learning opportunities like this as she shared,

more teachers should pick up on her teaching style because I never felt like I was in class. She was never lecturing to us. It was always everyone talking. She always made it seem like no matter who was talking, they were the most important [person] in the room. It felt like a group of friends just sitting around talking and I think if all of my classes were like that, I would have stayed in a heartbeat.

In addition, “she also tied in what we were learning about with current events…it made what we were learning seem relevant.” Inez shared,

the classes I was able to thrive in were the ones that are really discussion-based. It really helped me to elaborate on a concept or a problem. Also, doing small group work like turning to your neighbor, talk a bit, and then share with the big group helped people feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts.

Ruth also enjoyed breaking the class into small groups. Ruth shared, “When the bigger classes would break up into small groups, that was really helpful for me.” She shared a positive experience in her kinesiology class where the students “broke up into small groups and did a lot
of hands-on activities,” which really seemed to help Ruth learn the material. Nancy added that the classes she was able to “thrive in were very discussion-based and hands-on experiences.” The experiences shared by the participants illustrates that hands-on, discussion-based courses support their learning. In addition, Ruth illustrated how this is possible even in courses not typically designed as discussion-based courses.

Mary also shared that discussion-based classes really helped her in the classroom. In these classes,

We didn’t just discuss; we discussed what we read and we each had a different opinion and we each got to hear different opinions. When it came to doing things, as in class activities, we all got to participate. I feel like because it was hands-on and discussion-based we got something out of it.

Ruth supported this idea, stating, “I do best when I have the visual component with the auditory component and the classes I really enjoyed are the ones that do a bit of lecturing and then more hands-on.” She shared a positive learning experience in her finance class where the instructor lectured a bit and then broke them into pairs to develop a budget. She shared,

the teacher gave us a certain amount of money and we had to budget for food, transportation, that kind of stuff. Even though we were doing the work, it was still nice to break up from the monotony of teachers lecturing.

Martha echoed this response, stating, “I am very hands-on. I’m very visual. I think I did better in classes like that rather than those classes that were just sitting in a room listening to people talk and there’s nothing for me to actually do.” Eleanor shared her experience in one class that made her feel more comfortable because, “I liked the way the teacher had us sit. She had us sit in a big circle so we could see each other, and she was just really open to conversations. I
remember going around and having to say something at least once, but it was never really awkward or anything because everyone was participating so that really helped.” The participants illustrate how important it is to include classroom engagement in course delivery. The lecture style format does not prove to be as effective for many students seeking a degree in higher education today.

In addition to the in-class support, participants also identified the importance of out-of-classroom support. Janet expressed the need for faculty to stress that “they’re there to help you outside of the class as well.” Catherine shared an experience with a faculty member, stating, “she gave us time to express if we have any concerns or questions and she really listened. After that, she tried to give you the best advice or the best answer she could possibly give you.” Inez enjoyed professors who,

tried to actually be engaged with us, asking [students] personal things too. That really helped actually [get to] know the professors and [it helped us] know they care about us. To actually witness it, actually having them ask other personal questions and not just school-based was really helpful for me to open up and ask them for help when I needed it.

Breaking down barriers in the classroom between the faculty members and peers assisted these participants in the ability to feel comfortable in their learning environment. The classroom set-up and the delivery of the content assists students with building a strong learning community within their classrooms.

In addition to course content delivery, Eleanor shared that she thrived in classes that were more diverse because “I felt those were the classes in which I could be more open.” She continued with, “I saw people who look kinda like me and it was appreciated.” Eleanor’s point
emphasizes the importance of establishing a comfortable classroom environment which can be established more quickly with a faculty member who demonstrates care, encourages engagement, and develops a love of learning.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I presented the findings of qualitative data collected during individual interviews in this study. The description of the participants provided context for the students who contributed to this study which included their educational journey. Some participants successfully persisted and obtained their college degree while others did not complete their degrees. Utilizing data from students admitted to a program adopted to meet the needs of conditionally admitted at-risk students and provide long-term support to graduation at one university, I identified academically helpful support systems and what additional resources were necessary to support student success. The findings suggested factors that proved to be obstacles to degree completion which included K-12 academic poverty, pre-college support, family influence personal motivation, financial obstacles, first-generation student status, and curriculum delivery. The findings also included factors that provided successful educational support such as pre-college support, family influence, personal motivation, curriculum delivery and support systems in place such as mentorship, faculty/staff support and Living-Learning communities. In the next chapter I offer analysis of these findings and discuss solutions to assist colleges and universities in supporting the persistence of at-risk students.
CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS-EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

My study explored the educational experiences of students identified as at-risk and their ability or inability to remain in college and earn a college degree. The purpose of this study was to determine what at-risk students identify as support systems contributing to their college success, and the obstacles they faced in completing their degrees. I conducted interviews with 13 students who attended a small Midwestern urban university. Six of the participants successfully obtained their college degrees while the remaining seven left college prior to their degree completion. The primary themes that emerged during the research were: obstacles to degree completion, which included the sub-themes academic poverty, lack of pre-college support, family influence, lack of personal motivation, financial obstacles, first-generation status, and curriculum delivery; and degree completion support, which included the sub-themes pre-college support, personal motivation, family influence, peer mentorship, LEAP/Emerging Scholars Living-Learning Community, faculty/staff support, and curriculum delivery, some of which they experienced in both their K-12 and college experience. At-risk students face many obstacles in their pursuit of education. While many at-risk students access higher education, an overwhelming number do not complete their degrees (AAAS, 2017). For many participants, the experiences they had in their K-12 experience ultimately influenced their college experience and their belief that they could be successful in college.

This chapter utilizes the theories established by Renden (2009), hooks (1994), and Smith (2013) to analyze the data collected from the participants in this study. The participants re-affirmed the need for sentipensante and engaged pedagogy to change the way educators define
academic success and engagement. In addition, the participants expressed how helpful mentors can be in supporting student success in college.

**Sentipensante Pedagogy**

I begin this section of the analysis chapter utilizing Rendon’s (2009) sentipensante pedagogy of student support to interpret the obstacles my participants faced in both their K-12 and higher educational experience. I organized the first section of this chapter into three of Rendon’s (2009) main themes which include 1) “privileging intellectualism at the expense of inner knowing” 2) “disconnecting faculty from students” and 3) “privileging Western structures of knowledge” (p. 112) to best serve the increasingly diverse student populations found on college campuses. The data provided by the participants in this research reinforced the themes presented by Rendon.

Sentipensante pedagogy brings to light the deficiencies in current Western culture and the determination of future success, particularly for the diverse student body entering colleges and universities today. The theory presents why some students who do not perform well on standardized admissions tests such as the ACT and SAT are still able to persist in college and obtain their college degrees. One explanation is the emphasis society places on intellectualism versus a more well-rounded approach to knowledge, the disconnection of faculty from students and privileging Western structures of knowing as outlined by Rendon.

**Privileging Intellectualism at the Expense of Inner Knowing**

Rendon (2009) believed educators need to honor the whole person, not just the mathematical and linguistical knowledge often measured in classrooms and on standardized tests. Rendon’s (2009) theory invites educators to honor a student’s emotional intelligence as much as their intellectual intelligence. Students experiencing varying levels of academic poverty recognize the inability of their teachers to meet their educational needs. These students, often
designated as “at-risk,” feel written off and not supported in their K-12 experience because they did not meet the traditional intellectual educational standards valued by U.S. society. This feeling was an experience that was all too common for the participants of this study. Elsie shared an example of this competitive nature when she asked her school counselor to send her transcripts to her first-choice college, the site of this study. She shared, “I asked her to send my transcripts here; she told me no at first because she didn’t think I had a good enough ACT score or grades to go to an actual university.” Sabrina had a similar experience. She shared, “I had high school teachers who told me I was never good enough for anything which was really hard, especially when you’re taking a class from a teacher and they don’t grade your work because, ‘Oh she’s stupid.’” Rendon, (2009) states,

Invalidation can be considered a form of oppression, a way that people in power exert dominance over others. In the educational arena, one way that oppression manifests itself is when teachers make their students doubtful about their ability to succeed (p.94). Rendon (2009) warned against this competitive approach to education and encouraged educators to look at the whole person and the skills they offer before writing them off as unsuccessful students and future employees. Rendon (2009) shared the philosophy of Jaffe, an English teacher engaged in this important approach, who stated, “students from low-income backgrounds have strengths. They bring resilience, having overcome many difficult challenges in life. They bring their own culture, and their life experiences, which can be used to foster learning” (p. 98). Sabrina reinforced this theory when she shared, “They [high school teachers and counselors] never took time to know me as a student,” which demonstrates how educators denied her college potential by disregarding her own learning style established to best support a documented disability. Had Sabrina’s teachers recognized her educational strengths, Sabrina could have
received an improved K-12 educational experience. Clearly, Sabrina knew what she needed both in high school and in college and sought those opportunities to be successful on her own. She also recognized the burden carried by first-generation students, particularly first-generation students of color, to do well in college, stating:

As much as it is [an accomplishment] to get into college, it’s an emotional factor for a lot of students of color because your family has expectations for you…if you don’t pass the class, it’s not just like “oh, I didn’t pass that class”. It’s like, you struggled to get here your whole life because you have been labeled your whole life, and to not succeed…can be hard for a lot of students of color.

Her resilience highlights Rendon’s belief that there is more to a person’s perceived ability to succeed than outcomes based on linguistic and logical mathematical test scores, the primary skills traditionally measured to determine a students’ readiness for and ability to succeed in college. That resilience is an asset not only for degree completion, but also to be successful professionals.

All the participants in this study who successfully obtained a college degree demonstrated similar grit and persistence in their academic pursuits which reinforces Rendon’s (2009) theory that “inner knowing” is just as important in determining academic success as intellectualism. While society places emphasis on linguistic and logical mathematical test scores to measure knowledge, this emphasis can ultimately lead to a disconnect between educators and their students.

**Disconnecting Faculty from Students**

Rendon (2009) warned against the disconnection between faculty and students and highlighted the importance of a strong connection between the two, particularly for the benefit of at-risk students. Rendon (2009) explained this is especially powerful for at-risk students “when
faculty were able to see something more in [students] than what they [students] were able to see in themselves” (p. 128). Participants in this study spoke to this element in Rendon’s theory. For example, Martha was quite up-front about her thoughts about faculty, stating, “I think when teachers and professors have a better connection with their students, they [students] do better.” Eleanor shared an effective practice for faculty to assist their student’s success in college is to, “let their students know that they care and that these people matter to them.” She continued by stating, “they should let the students know that they are available and that they do care about their success.” Martha shared, “I think [faculty] just checking in with students and seeing how they’re doing, whether they are doing great or bad…having a better connection with their actual students” would benefit student success in class. When describing a positive experience with a faculty member, Catherine simply stated, “She gave me time to express if we have any concerns or questions and she really listened.” Catherine’s comment illustrates how important it is to minimize any possible disconnection between the faculty and the student. Rendon (2009) stated, “interpersonal validation came about when faculty brought out the best of their students as human beings, recognized students by name, and affirmed them as individuals” (p. 128). The data provided by the participants in this study confirm Rendon’s theory about faculty and student connection both inside and outside of the classroom.

The participants shared examples of how their K-12 experiences influenced their confidence and their belief in their ability to complete a college degree. It is important for college educators to realize at-risk students need extra support to overcome their prior negative K-12 experiences and recognize their full potential. Rendon (2009) stated, “Many of these students had been wounded by invalidating actions others had taken against them. For example, some had been told they were incapable of doing college-level work, were treated as stupid or
lazy and were stereotyped” (p. 93). Five of the participants in this study revealed that they had experiences with teachers or counselors who discouraged them from attending college. Some shared that they were specifically told they would not do well in college. For all of these students, the doubts expressed by their teachers contrarily proved to be a motivator for their persistence and success in not only getting accepted to college, but in earning their college degrees. All participants indicated the courses in which they achieved the most success were courses in which the faculty member took time to get to know them as individuals. Additionally, all participants indicated they had at least one person who served as a resource in their college careers. Rendon (2009) asserted this behavior by faculty is “a key ontological principle of Sentipensante Pedagogy [which] is that it asks instructors to work with individuals as whole human beings – intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual” (p. 128). The participants recognized when faculty demonstrated key tenets of Rendon’s theory.

One strategy to minimize the disconnection between the faculty and the student can be accomplished through course content delivery. All participants in my study indicated the courses in which they were the most successful used multiple teaching pedagogies to better meet the needs of diverse learners. All 13 participants indicated they could not effectively learn the class material from instructors who solely used PowerPoint and stood in front of the class and lectured for the entire class period. This data support Rendon’s (2009) argument for curriculum and teaching reform to best meet the needs of diverse learning styles. As Rendon (2009) stated, “it takes a special kind of professor and a unique kind of pedagogy to take these students from their self-doubts to a heightened awareness about their academic abilities” (p. 93). Rendon illustrated a model faculty member as someone who disregards “the entrenched belief system which privileges separation, monodisciplinarity, competition, intellectualism, and passivity at the
expense of collaboration, transdisciplinarity, intuition and active learning” (p. 135). This was clearly illustrated when Elsie shared her college experience and the need to re-take two courses. When she took the courses the first time, the instructors did not engage with the students, did not use a variety of teaching styles, and simply shared knowledge from the front of the room with the support of a PowerPoint. When she re-took the courses from different instructors who used a variety of teaching modes and who expressed an interest in supporting the students both personally and intellectually, Elsie thrived. Once again, this is an example of the very same courses taught in two different ways. The first time Elsie took the course delivered in the traditional transfer of knowledge (Freire, 1974) approach, and when she re-took the course, the faculty member utilized multiple teaching formats to deliver the content. The second format serves as an example of what Rendon (2009) highlighted as a model teaching format to best meet the needs of at-risk students. Elsie’s very specific example supports Rendon’s (2009) theory that higher education needs to move away from the disconnection between faculty and students to more innovative teaching styles.

Elsie was not the only participant who experienced a traditional style of teaching that did not properly support learning. Catherine supported the need to eliminate PowerPoint from the classroom and indicated she desires “for my teachers to not just read off of PowerPoint.” She reflected on a negative learning experience when she described a faculty member who just read everything from a Power Point. She shared “I’d be like, ‘Well this isn’t really helping me; I could do that.’” She continued with:

I wanted her to explain her point of view, so that I could take notes of the things that the PowerPoint doesn’t say. “Don’t just read to me; show me, or explain to me in your thoughts, so that I can have a better understanding of what you are talking about.”
Ruth supported this sentiment when she described her anatomy course, stating, “it was a long lecture where you just sat there the whole time and just absorbed all the information. There wasn’t too much hands-on activities to learn it besides the lab.” Emma reinforced the need for diverse learning formats. She indicated some visual aids were better than just “sitting there lecturing. I do best when I have visual components” which alluded to the fact that she would rather have PowerPoints than no visual aids. However, the fact that she enjoyed a more “hands-on” classroom experience was evident when she reflected on a finance class in which the instructor lectured for a bit and then divided students into small groups to develop a budget. She shared, “we were doing the work and it was nice to break up from the monotonous of teachers lecturing.” Similarly, Martha stated, “I am very hands-on. I’m very visual. I did better in those classes versus the classes that we were just sitting in a room listening to people talk and there’s nothing for me to actually do.” These examples illustrate the need for pedagogy reform to support diverse learning styles. Although some faculty have begun to make the shift, as highlighted by the student examples, more progress needs to be made to discontinue the traditional teaching format.

Janet shared experiences with contrasting teaching approaches, particularly in her K-12 experience. She shared she felt more successful when teachers recognized her interest in a topic and “gave me other projects I could do [which] really helped me flourish in topics I was excited about.” Contrastingly, other instructors gave up on her when she did not show interest in the topic. She shared, “they didn’t try to push further to try different options or try to teach different ways if I wasn’t getting it a certain way.” This example demonstrates the importance of the teacher/student relationship and the ability to understand the unique nature of their students learning needs and the best teaching format needed to engage students in the learning process, an
understanding that can only come when you create intentional relationships with students. To properly engage in Sentipensante Pedagogy, an instructor must be “open to diverse disciplinary approaches to learning, and recognize that learning can be enhanced with access to diverse forms of knowledge” (Rendon, 2009, p. 135). An educator equipped with diverse disciplinary approaches to teaching can better meet the needs of a diverse classroom.

This contrast of teaching styles extended to Janet’s college career as she took classes both at the site of this study and at a neighboring institution. She stated,

I feel like the [faculty at the site of this study] really wanted to gauge each individual person in the class and how fast they were learning. While over at [neighboring institution], it was like, “This is the pace of the class, and if you can’t keep up, you’ll need to meet with me outside of class to catch up.”

Janet strongly recommended “creating a really open environment in the classes where [faculty] connect with students one-on-one.” Further, she shared a solution for diverse learners by stating faculty need to “make it known that the professor in the class is not gonna shut you out for having a different story or coming from a different background.” She continued to illustrate the need to minimize the disconnection between faculty and students by ensuring faculty are open to out-of-the classroom interactions. Janet stated, “if [students] don’t feel comfortable in class or need additional help or resources, that they’re there to help you outside of classes as well.”

Nancy suggested that faculty and staff go through self-awareness training to promote awareness of the diverse needs of their students. She stated that faculty need to:

Be aware that not every student is the same, and every student has different barriers that they are facing and working on overcoming. Just having self-awareness in their daily life
and their practice that each student is going to need a different tailored intervention to make them successful.

This statement affirms Rendon’s (2009) theory on the importance of faculty and student relationships and the need for faculty to be aware and engaged with their students.

Janet was not the only participant who shared an example of Rendon’s (2009) recommendation to minimize the disconnect between faculty and students. Although Bernice did not persist to graduation, she shared this about her most influential faculty member; “she changed my life.” Janet continued to say, “she did not teach out of the books.” Bernice’s description of her faculty member not only reinforced Rendon’s philosophy of faculty/student engagement but also continued with an image of hook’s (2013) theory of engaged pedagogy (which will be covered in the next section of this chapter) by stating, “everyone sits in a semi-circle and it was a discussion. I learned something new every single day.” She recommended: more teachers should pick up on her teaching style, because it never felt like it was a class. She was never lecturing to us. It always felt like a group of friends just sitting around talking and I think if all of my classes were like that, I would’ve stayed at [the site of this study] in a heartbeat.

Not only did this instructor teach in a way that supported Bernice’s academic success, but the instructor also understood Bernice’s mental health struggles and provided a supportive environment both personally and academically. Inez supported this sentiment when she shared that her positive faculty/student relationships developed when the faculty member’s actions mirrored their words. Often, faculty members tell students to visit them in office hours or that they want to know the students outside of the classroom, but it means so much more when their actions reinforce these claims. Inez said she knew her faculty cared about her when they asked
personal questions and not just questions that were academically related. It helped her to reach out to those faculty when she needed support.

Several participants expressed the need for faculty members to develop relationships with their students. Smaller class sizes can enable the faculty member to develop relationships more effectively. Catherine credits her academic success to her small class sizes and stated, “I really liked the fact that the classes were 15-20 people and that my professor knew me, and they were able to help me.” She continued by sharing how faculty can be supportive of the academic success of at-risk students and stated, “Just be involved in that student’s life, knowing what’s going on, knowing that they don’t only have one class; they have a million other things to do.” Catherine encouraged faculty to ask students if they need help when they recognize a student may be struggling. She stated faculty should be more involved by asking, “Do you have any questions? Are you sure you understand? If not, we can go over this again. Come to my office hours.” Catherine reiterated how important it is to encourage students to meet with faculty during their office hours because “a lot of students are intimidated to go.” Mary, who struggled with mental health issues and did not persist to graduation, indicated a better understanding of students and their unique needs could have helped her situation. She stressed faculty should:

Make sure students are comfortable with you, because some professors make it difficult to even try to talk because they’re not understanding and say that some of our obstacles are not that big of a deal. It makes it difficult for you to talk to them about anything because you’re afraid they are not going to be understanding about it.

The examples highlighted in this section support Rendon’s (2009) theory to avoid the disconnection between faculty and students to better support the diverse needs of today’s students. This leads to the third and final section of this analysis section which enforces the need
to step away from traditional teaching styles toward a more engaging, transformative teaching approach.

**Privileging Western Structures of Knowing**

Higher education was created by and for predominantly White men (Thelin et. al., 2019). Although the face of the student body is changing rapidly, the way in which educators teach, and measure student learning outcomes have not changed with the pace of the student demographic. Rendon (2009) warned educators to break the cycle of traditional styles of teaching and learning and recommended the need to “break away from entrenched structures inherent in the old vision of teaching and learning as an act of dissent and resistance” (p. 113). Many deserving students may not access a college education because they do not meet the Western standards of accomplishment measured by standardized test scores primarily focusing on linguistic and logical mathematical knowledge. For those who do make it to college, the systems higher education has in place can inhibit a student’s ability to persist to graduation. Sabrina stated, “tests don’t always show a student’s ability. They show that you can take a test, and you can pass. It’s great for you, but not everybody’s that way.” This statement reinforces Rendon’s belief that students have more to offer the educational experience than sheer test scores. Sabrina continued by sharing:

I am not a test taker. Tests give me anxiety. I didn’t really understand what the SAT really was or what they wanted from me. The ACT wanted math and science and I only took one year of science …and it had been a year or so since I had taken a math class. She also shared that she did better on the SAT because it contained history components, a natural area of interest for her. Rendon (2009) highlighted that a more well-rounded approach to measure a student’s knowledge is necessary. This approach is valued by diverse communities which requires educators to consider the whole person and what they bring to the pursuit of
scholarship rather than focusing on a narrow approach to knowledge. Even as educators teach a variety of disciplines at the college and university level, they often find themselves perpetuating a habit, claiming, “this is the way it has always been done.” This may be true, but the students now attending college no longer resemble the students which higher education was originally intended to educate.

Rendon (2009) persuaded educators to transform their approach to ensure the success of the diverse students they now serve. Many students have learned to conform to traditional ways of learning, but this changing student demographic needs multiple modes of learning to find true academic success. Elsie shared her discouragement when a faculty member did not express a desire to help both her and her classmates when they were struggling with course content. She shared that the faculty members mentality was a bit aloof and gave her the feeling of “I’ll see how you do on the test” which is a direct contradiction of Rendon’s (2009) recommendation to move away from a competitive approach to learning. This example was a reactive approach instead of a proactive, collaborative approach to the students’ learning. Elsie continued to say that in the first year, it is especially important for faculty members to reach out to their students. She said if she had struggled her first year, “I probably wouldn’t reach out to a professor just because of my personality and the new environment.” The participants outlined the need for a proactive approach from faculty to support student success.

In addition to faculty support, all the participants in this study clearly sent a message that instructors need to eliminate PowerPoint and the transfer of knowledge (Freire, 1974) mentality and replace it with a more transformative teaching style which encourages mutual learning between the faculty member and the student. Nancy indicated the classes hardest for her were a more traditional style in which “you just sit there, and you listen to the professor lecture and
lecture and that’s it. They’ll read out of the book and say, ‘All right any questions?’” This experience is common but ineffective for many at-risk students. Bernice, diagnosed with bipolar personality disorder, shared her desire to learn the material, but that she “can’t sit still in a classroom for three hours.” She felt if faculty knew more about mental illness, they would understand how difficult it is to sit and listen to one person talk for a full class period. She also described classes without lectures as a positive classroom setting. Bernice shared, “everybody was talking. It was always a group discussion and [the faculty member] always made it seem like no matter who was talking, they were the most important in the room.” The participants readily shared that the courses in which they were more successful were the classrooms where the instructors facilitated discussion and engaged with the classroom as a mutual participant in the learning process. Mary added that class activities in which the entire class was able to participate also helped her learning in the classroom. Elsie said she had one faculty member who successfully used PowerPoint, but she enhanced her classroom lecture with “videos that we watched for studying. Then she would give us hand-outs to use as study guides.” In addition, the students who persisted to graduation clearly sent a message that despite their low ACT or SAT scores, both traditional Western measurement of knowledge, they too can be successful in college. Janet shared her most positive learning experience as “there’d be reading, and then it would be opinion based off that reading. There was no wrong answer. [The faculty member] helped guide the conversation in a way that was so welcoming and inclusive of everyone’s opinion.” Nancy thrived in discussion-based classes and classes with hands on experience. She felt faculty were able to recognize more quickly if you were off track or not catching on to the material and could make “tailored interventions or adjustments”. Ruth reflected on her kinesiology class, stating,
We did a lot where we broke up into smaller groups and a lot of work was hands on, which was really helpful for me because I am a hands-on learner and I don’t do good just sitting still and learning.

The discussion approach versus the delivery of facts and figures can help students develop their critical thinking skills and will push them to go past the boundaries of a typical test-taking course. The ability of faculty to participate in discussions with students allows faculty to “share power with the students in the classroom” (Rendon, 2009, p. 137). Rendon’s sentipensante pedagogy focuses on engagement strategies as described by the participants of this study and the successful classroom experiences they enjoyed.

Rendon (2009) also encouraged educators to “analyze structural problems that preclude change, and to recognize social injustices and take action against them” (p.137). A bit of an outlier in this study, but a concern worth mentioning, involves systems put in place to ostensibly encourage college completion but that in fact negatively influence college completion for others. In order to qualify for aid, students need to be enrolled in 12 credits, and if they extend their education beyond the traditional four-year experience, their aid drops significantly. This system may work well as an incentive for the traditional student to remain focused, complete their degrees and eventually pay back student loans. But for Ruth, this system was a barrier to completion. As a student with dyslexia, she did well in high school because she had strong support and could take few classes at a time. As she enrolled in college, she thought she would finish her degree and that she could handle the course load. She stated:

Going into it, I definitely thought four years; I was gonna get there, get my degree, and then go into a field I liked. But then, after my first year second semester and second year first semester, it was just too much.
She knew she could handle the work at an appropriate pace, but she had concerns about the required course load. She shared,

To keep my financial aid, you have to have at least 12 credits. My brain could not absorb that much. I can’t learn that much new material. If I had one or two classes, I think I would have done just fine, just because I take a lot longer than most, just because I have to re-read and constantly look up words I have no idea what they mean, so it just takes me a lot longer to grasp that new information. But I had to take 12 credits in order to get financial aid. I just couldn’t prioritize one class over another so they all just kind of had half of my attention. I really only felt comfortable taking one or two classes and I knew that wouldn’t be an option to keep my financial aid.

In this case, a system that values course completion and four-year graduation rates kept a capable student from completing her degree all together. Rendon (2009) encourages educators, which includes educational systems, to set other initiatives aside to focus on making the changes necessary to support diverse students with their complex needs and not merely repeat past behaviors simply because “that is the way it has always been done.”

Summary

In this section, I analyzed the data through Rendon’s (2009) theoretical framework, demonstrating how students require a culturally responsible style of teaching and learning that does not measure their learning outcomes solely on linguistical and mathematical acquisition of knowledge. The participants in this study reinforced Rendon’s (2009) theory for serving a diverse learning style by “working with individuals as whole human beings – intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual” (p. 135). Their educational path reinforces what Rendon warned against that educators should avoid 1) “privileging intellectualism at the expense of inner knowing” 2)
“disconnecting faculty from students” and 3) “privileging Western structures of knowledge” (p. 112). The participants also reinforced the tenets of Rendon’s Sentipensante theory requiring educators to “disrupt and transform the entrenched belief system, cultivate well-rounded individuals who possess knowledge and wisdom and instill in learners a commitment to sustain life, maintain the rights of all people and preserve nature and harmony in the world” (Rendon, 2009, p. 135-136). hooks (2009), affirmed Rendon and reminded educators of essential characteristics necessary to support the academic success of at-risk students or students from under-represented groups.

**Engaged Pedagogy**

As outlined in Chapter Two, some scholars believe higher education professionals need to better educate incoming students about the current educational process, while others believe the educational system needs to change to better support at-risk students. While both may be true, the participants in this study advocated for a change in the system and the way faculty have traditionally taught course content. The next section of my theoretical analysis utilizes hooks’ (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy to substantiate the data gathered by my participants. The elements included in hooks’ theory include conceptualization of knowledge, linking theory to practice, and student empowerment to better serve the diverse learning style of college students today.

**Conceptualization of Knowledge**

Almost 25 years ago, hooks warned educators against “insidious cultural reproduction in schools” (Florence, 1998, p. 76), suggesting that power and privilege should not come at the expense of under-represented groups to avoid “discriminatory practices in educational settings and the wider society” (Florence, 1998, p. 76). While most of the participants in this study described aspects of the conceptualization of knowledge, two participants specifically vocalized
their concern over the cyclical nature of teaching and learning. Sabrina shared, “you teach the way you were taught…this is the way things were taught, but ‘this’ is not working.” She continued by saying, “They [faculty] know what they want, and they’ll teach us something, but they don’t adapt, and they don’t really see that they need to change with the students’ demands.”

In addition, Bernice shared:

PowerPoints. I hate PowerPoints, because all it is is an outlet for a professor to stand in front of the classroom, speak in a monotone voice and click through slides that he probably had for years prior. It was excruciating.

The data gathered from the participants of this study strongly suggest exploration of a different and more engaging way of teaching to better support their learning.

Sabrina and Bernice clearly illustrated what hooks warned against in the educational process, that the traditional teaching norms do not best meet the needs of students, particularly under-represented groups. hooks argued that this “monocentric curriculum,” as reinforced by the data from the participants, “privileges students whose cultural norms are reflected within school culture granting them authority in the classroom settings and discussions while simultaneously alienating students whose cultural histories and traditions are subordinated or excluded” (Florence, 1998, p. 76). Instead, hooks encouraged “a union of mind, body and spirit” and the emphasis of “the inner life of students and teachers, a connection between learning in the classroom and life experiences and the empowerment of teachers and students” (Rendon, 2009, p. 15). The students seek relationships with their faculty, not hierarchical power differentials that incite fear instead of mutual learning. Patti shared of her classroom experience, “everything was good as long as the professor was willing to open themselves [to the classroom] and to
teach,” demonstrating the desire from students for faculty to be more vulnerable in the teaching and learning process instead of a stoic deliverer of knowledge.

When the classroom setting fostered a mutual learning and teaching environment for everyone, including the instructor, learning became fun for the participants. Bernice shared an example of a positive experience with a classroom utilizing primarily group discussion. She shared:

I retained so much information in that class. I still have my textbooks from that class because sometimes I want to look over them. I retained so much information because everyone was talking…and [the faculty members] always tied in current events, which helped…because it made what we were learning seem relevant.

Bernice’s love of learning was evident when mutual learning was encouraged, a sharp contrast from the description and the dread of sitting through a class utilizing traditional forms of teaching. Eleanor described the class and the classroom setting that was most effective for her:

I just liked the way the teacher had us sit. She had us sit kind of in a big circle so we could see each other, and she was just really open to conversations and it made it seem okay and comfortable to talk to one another. We had conversations about our books, what we read, and I remember having to go around and say something at least once, but it was not awkward because everyone was participating.

Inez supported this sentiment and shared, “classes I was able to thrive in were really discussion-based. It really helps to elaborate on either, if it’s a concept, or a problem.” Inez shared that breaking into small groups to discuss a topic before opening it up to the large group helped her build confidence in her learning. She continued by stating, “it doesn’t feel like people are put on the spot…and you felt comfortable then in the large group.” In contrast, she barely passed the
classes where “I felt like it was more just teaching at me.” In this instance, Inez indicated it was hard for her to retain the information. The data collected in this study further demonstrates a need for change in the educational systems as outlined by hooks (1994) and requires educators to not only take a hard look at their teaching practice but make the changes necessary to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

**Linking Theory to Practice**

Often, educators understand how diverse teaching formats can better support all learners in their classrooms (hooks, 1994). Unfortunately, the fear of change interrupts this needed change, which further perpetuates elitism and minimizes the lived realities of at-risk students. Eleanor stressed the importance of faculty to create a welcoming, friendly classroom to facilitate mutual learning in the classroom. She shared her fear of public speaking, which was even worse when the faculty member did not create an environment to make the experience more tolerable for someone who feared it so much. She reflected, “When I would be up there talking and looking out, it’d be like three weeks or four weeks into the class and these are all still strangers in front of me.” The data provided by Eleanor supports hooks’ theory which encourages educators to link theory to practice, avoiding the perpetuation of elitism and to teach to students’ lived realities (Florence, 1998). Clearly, participants echo over and over the need for faculty to be aware of their complex lives and their need for a mutual relationship in learning with their faculty. The idea of linking theory to practice is further demonstrated in the participants’ data in the student empowerment section of this chapter.

**Student Empowerment**

hooks encouraged the minimization of faculty as the privileged authority figure in the classroom and learners as passive recipients (Florence, 1998). The data collected in this study confirm this theory as the participants did not appear to hold much respect for the instructors
who elevated the sense of authority in the classroom without engaging students in a mutual learning process. The frustration in Sabrina’s voice was evident when she shared the aura often given off by these professors, stating, “yeah, this is lecture. I’m gonna talk for an hour because I’m the person that spent all those years in school, spent all that money, and I have the right and this is my place.” Sabrina shared that, even though her faculty occasionally came from this viewpoint, she did learn content in the course, just not the content the teacher thought was the most important, which illustrates a need to change how educators measure student learning.

Students invested in their education are not passive recipients of knowledge, and educators should recognize that student growth in a subject, no matter which content, is valuable to their success as a student.

Changing the way educators measure learning may empower students to enjoy the love of learning, engaging in content that speaks to them instead of simply memorizing content to perform well on a test. As an alternative, Sabrina shared, “I really do like professors who try to make class interactive, to engage students mentally.” She questioned a faculty member who comes into a classroom with the attitude of “this is East Asia. Here’s a PowerPoint. I’ll explain East Asia history.” Retention of the knowledge of course content proves difficult for students when presented in this format. Sabrina reflected, “I have no background in this and you’re expecting me to retain this whole world of knowledge?” Sabrina reinforced how difficult it is to retain information when the class format is a transfer of knowledge (Freire, 1974) approach versus a more interactive approach to learning.

Patti affirmed this notion, stating, “discussion-based [classes] are my favorite because then I can share my experiences, little details.” This statement illustrates exactly what hooks (Florence, 1998) professed with the student empowerment tenet of engaged pedagogy and
linking theory to practice, that student involvement in the educational process allows for the class to hear a diverse perspective; this tenet values the inclusion of lived realities versus a textbook version that often only fits one group of people. Students enjoy the opportunity to learn from the lived experiences of their classmates. Janet’s comments supported this theory when she shared how faculty could support students’ classroom success:

I feel like creating a really open environment in the classes where they connect with students one-on-one and make sure everyone’s opinion is included, or if it’s not included, opening up the floor to have other students kind of speak their truth …and make it known that it’s okay for everyone to be different in these classes and have different opinions.

Emma echoed this sentiment:

I really like in professors that they’re patient, they’re kind and they love teaching and you can see and feel that love of teaching, not just they’re doing it because it’s a job. I definitely had teachers who were just doing it because they’re doing it, but they’ve lost that yearning to enrich people.

This quote demonstrates the importance of engagement between the faculty member and the student. The data shared in this section support hooks’ theory of engaged pedagogy. Similar to Rendon (2009) hooks’ too, criticized the “prescribed roles of teachers as privileged voices, learners as passive recipients of established truths” (Florence, 1998, p.77) and instead encouraged “greater teacher/student interaction” (Florence, 1998, p.77). Clearly, higher education needs to make the changes required to support our diverse student population.

Summary

In this section, I shared data from my research utilizing hooks’ (1994) theoretical analysis of engaged pedagogy (1994) to demonstrate how at-risk students require faculty to be engaged
with the student in the educational process. Simply utilizing the transfer of knowledge (Freire, 1974) approach no longer works for the students who are now joining communities of higher education. The participants in this study reinforced hooks’ theory for serving diverse learning styles by avoiding the conceptualization of knowledge, linking theory to practice to avoid the perpetuation of elitism, and teaching to students’ lived realities (Florence, 1998) in the classroom. To do so will recognize students have contributions to make to the learning process and education should not be a one-sided ritual.

The participants also reinforced the tenets of hooks’ engaged pedagogy, critiquing the “prescribed roles of teachers as privileged voices, learners as passive recipients of established truths” (Florence, 1998, p. 77). Instead, engaged pedagogy encourages greater teacher/student interaction, and experience clearly desired by the participants of this study. Smith (2013) reinforced the importance of faculty and student relationships to support the success of at-risk students in higher education by adopting mentoring relationships. This theory is particularly helpful in navigating students through the hidden curriculum of higher education through mentorship.

**Mentorship**

Mentorship played a significant role in the participants’ transition to and persistence through their college experience. Many described the various roles of faculty, staff and peers in mentoring them through the three stages of mentorship Smith (2013) identified as advising, advocacy, and apprenticeship.

**Advising and Advocacy**

Smith’s (2013) theory of mentorship begins with a discussion of the value of advising and advocacy for students. Smith’s (2013) advising cycle of mentorship represents the
“transmission of low degrees of capital by telling students what they should do” (p. 62). Next, the advocacy cycle elevates to a “transmission of medium degrees of capital motivating and connecting students with key people on campus” (p. 62) to assist students in successfully navigating the hidden curriculum of higher education. Educators at the site of this study created the LEAP and Emerging Scholars program to support at-risk students with their transition to college, and designed it to deliver both advising and advocacy to at-risk students. The program is set up to both advise by telling students how they can find academic success, and to provide advocacy by helping students get connected to campus resources like the academic support center, money management and financial aid offices, career development, faculty from all disciplines, counseling services, multicultural student services, and student organizations. Many participants in this study identified their LEAP and Emerging Scholars experience as crucial to their transition to college, which emulates the advising and advocacy stages of mentorship as described by Smith.

Sabrina reflected on her LEAP/Emerging Scholars experience as, “Hey, we’re gonna sit you down in a classroom and help you develop those skills before you’re in physical college is very important. I think it makes you feel more confident as a student.” Sabrina reflected on the program kick-off which occurs over the summer prior to the students’ first year in college. Providing students with advance knowledge of what to expect in college is vital, particularly for first-generation students who do not have family members in their lives who can help clue them in to the differences between college and high school.

Smith (2013) claimed at-risk students often do not have the social capital more easily acquired by White middle-class students; instead, “a low-income, first-generation, and/or student of color is more likely to feel fearful and awkward in approaching a professor outside of the
classroom because of their limited interaction with professionals during their earlier family socialization process” (p.61). Janet reinforced the thoughts of Sabrina as she shared, “being a part of a program focused on college readiness…definitely gave me peace of mind because I saw there were more people in the program than just me.” After participating in the program, Janet recognized the difference between high school and college-level work and stated, “Okay, I just need to put in this extra more work for it to be college-level and it didn’t seem as daunting.” She reflected on the experience and realized the class paired with the program was helpful in getting her to the “level of writing, reading and understanding” to be successful in college. She stated, “I felt like it gave me a really good base to use those skills in all of my other classes.” Catherine added, “It helped me get organized, transition to that college experience.” The participants supported Smith’s (2013) argument that advising and advocacy for at-risk students can unveil the hidden curriculum of higher education to support at-risk students as they transition to college.

When Emma reflected on her transition to college, she recognized that the LEAP program and Emerging Scholars “set us up for success. I was only taking three classes while my friends were taking four or five. So, because I was in the program, they were slowly building me up to a full academic load.” Even with this load, she recognized that “managing three college classes was still kind of different than managing high school classes.” She remembers she had to learn to manage her time and “just learning to manage my time and fine-tune my study skills, ‘cause what worked for me in high school didn’t necessarily work for college.” This participant saw the benefits of limited course enrollment for some at-risk students, demonstrating that different approaches benefit students in different ways. For Emma, enrollment in three classes meant she could more successfully transition to college level work. As Smith (2013)
recommends, the support involved in helping Emma find a system that worked for her demonstrates the importance of advising relationships.

Holding students accountable to the program requirements is crucial for students identified as at-risk at admission. As administrators it is difficult to require students, especially if it means further singling out students who identify with an under-represented group, to participate in special programs or classes, but this requirement may be necessary to ensure long-term success. Many of the participants shared their displeasure with finding out they were enrolled in a special program, but upon reflection, they realized how important it was to ensure academic success. When Nancy received her acceptance letter and realized she was in a special program, she looked at it negatively. At the overnight registration event where she learned more about the program, she had a change of heart. She remembered thinking, “this is literally going to benefit me more than I thought. It’s going to make sure I have the resources in place to be successful.” She continued by stating:

It’s going to make sure I’m on the right track so I can graduate and so I’m no giving up at the last second. I have the support from the faculty and staff and LEAP that pushed me and got me towards where I needed to be.

Bernice reflected on the day she received her acceptance letter which included the expectation that she participate in the LEAP program. She recalled her thoughts: “So I am accepted to the stupid kid’s program. I found I got accepted but accepted with conditions. I mean, I needed it, but still … I didn’t want to accept that I needed it.” The feeling of shame at acceptance is real for these students and if given a choice, they would not have participated in the program. But, if they had made that choice, they would not have reaped the benefits, of which they were not aware they needed until they completed the program. This illustrates the need for educators to
heed the advice of Smith (2013) and develop advising opportunities to advise students on “what they should do” (p. 62) even though it may not be initially well received by the students.

Additional participants reflected on their LEAP experience with similar sentiments of initial frustration and later realization that the advising received supported their college transition. Inez reflected on her thoughts as she realized she was in a special program, stating, “Okay, we’re all here, so, we got accepted for a reason, so you just gotta get through it.” As Emma reflected on her LEAP and Emerging scholars experience, she recognized, After going through what I have gone through, I’m much more appreciative and understand why we did a lot of stuff. But when I was in it, I wasn’t really necessarily clear why they were doing things…they were trying to set us up for success.

A common shared advising experience has its benefits even when the participants are not initially excited to participate. Elsie took a different approach. Although she too was disappointed she was enrolled in a special program, she stated, “I went to every dine and learn [provided through Emerging Scholars]. I didn’t skip anything. If I’m going to be in this program, I’m going to let it benefit me.” This is not a common response to the news of enrollment in a special program, but she stated, “it’s all about attitude and effort because I was upset, too. I was kind of like, ‘Oh, I didn’t get to be a regular student, but at the same time, I did very well’” and now is one of the greatest spokespeople for the program encouraging new students to be fully engaged. The advising and advocacy Elsie received as a resident of the Emerging Scholars floor later influenced her decision to serve as a mentor in the program which is a key tenet of Smith’s (2013) mentorship theory.

Elsie engaged with the advisor stage of mentorship both in her own experience and she served as a mentor for new Emerging Scholars students. This demonstrates what Smith (2013)
described as: “continuous growth over a period of time when certain actions are consistently repeated within the mentoring relationship. They represent a fluid and constant circular flow of institutional cultural capital and social capital among mentors and mentees (p.61). In contrast, Eleanor did not participate in the advising opportunities offered to her, but she still found comfort in aspects of the program. She stated,

I probably felt the most comfortable inside my dorm with my roommates and the LEAP classes I was in. My English class was all LEAP students and it was diverse, but I also felt like those classes were the classes where I could be the most open.

She continued to say that the “English teacher made it really comfortable to go to her if we had any questions.” Unfortunately, Eleanor did not persist to graduation, leaving one to wonder if the outcome would have been different if she had fully participated in the program. Students who did actively participate in the program received programmatic elements aligning with the advising and the advocacy cycle of mentorship to assist them in their transition to college and to support their academic success. Many also experienced apprenticeship experiences, the third part of Smith’s (2013) advising model.

**Apprenticeship**

The apprenticeship cycle of Smith’s (2013) advising model encourages mentee/mentor relationships to support student success and persistence. Smith (2013) described this cycle as the opportunity for mentors to:

Empower mentees to transform into powerful social agents who determine their academic destiny. As a part of the empowering process, mentors have to show students through role-playing exercises, step-by-step, how to engage in appropriate conversations that could help them build stronger academic social relationships. (p. 64)
Although the examples shared in this section primarily highlight student-to-student mentoring relationships, the participants also provided examples of faculty/student relationships throughout this analysis chapter. After the first year of the Emerging Scholars program, residents shared that the only thing they were still scared to do was meet with faculty during office hours. They recommended the planners require students to meet with faculty as a part of the program. This data support Smith’s (2013) recommendation to develop role-playing activities to encourage the apprenticeship cycle of mentorship. After receiving this feedback, organizers of the Emerging Scholars Living-Learning Community added a faculty and student role-play component to curriculum for the floor, encouraging participants to meet with their assigned faculty. Emerging Scholars students were expected to set up the meeting, meet with the faculty, and discuss the role-play, which illustrated typical issues faced by first-year students. This activity is a recommended practice outlined in the apprenticeship model designed by Smith (2013).

Several of the participants highlighted the relationships they developed with the Emerging Scholars Study Advocates and the Resident Advisers (RAs), upper-class students assigned to support the program. For example, Mary highlighted:

LEAP helped us. We had the Emerging Scholars Study Advocates who were themselves in the LEAP program when they first started. They were there to help you if you had questions about anything. Through the program, many mentors came in and taught us about budgets. The LEAP program is there to make sure you can just succeed successfully in college. Know your resources, use them; if you don’t use them, it’s going to make it harder for yourself.

Elsie also recognized her student mentors and stated:
My RA on the Emerging Scholars floor [was] super great. I had a lot of questions about registering for classes. She checked in with me a lot about my science classes and stuff because that’s what she was taking. She helped me with statistics when I had questions.

In addition to recognizing the Study Advocates and the Resident Advisers, Elsie highlighted other mentorship experiences she had throughout her college career:

We had tutors for respiratory too, that were upperclassmen. There was one I met with a lot and she was super great. She taught me a way that was better for my learning than sometimes the professors did in class. She’s better at explaining stuff.

Mentorship at the apprenticeship level illustrates a definite investment in the academic success of all students and can be especially beneficial to students identified as at-risk. The importance of Smith’s model (2013) of advising, advocacy, and apprenticeship in unveiling the hidden curriculum for at-risk students is evident in the appreciation expressed by the participants in this study.

Summary

In this section, I shared data utilizing Smith’s (2013) theoretical analysis of mentorship to demonstrate how at-risk students benefit from a model of mentorship which includes advising, advocacy, and apprenticeship as defined by Smith (2013). The participants of this study reinforced the importance of mentoring relationships in not only their transition to college, but as a support throughout college in the pursuit of a college degree. Implementing intentional opportunities for mentorship could contribute to the academic success and degree completion for at-risk students.
Chapter Summary

Through the frameworks of Rendon (2014), hooks (1994) and Smith (2013), the data collected in this study affirm the need to change the way educators deliver the curriculum, measure student success, and engage with students in the learning process. Smith’s (2013) mentorship model was supported by the participants in this study as an essential tool in assisting at-risk students in the transition to college, and to minimize the obstacles to degree completion. The positive benefits of the development of faculty/student relationships engaged in mutual learning support a student’s academic success and persistence to graduation. Smith’s (2013) model serves as a tool to assist higher education in the successful implementation of the theories developed by Rendon (2014) and hooks (1994).
CHAPTER SIX
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to determine what at-risk students identify as support systems contributing to their academic success, and the obstacles they faced in completing their degrees. The primary goal of this study was to identify recommendations for colleges and universities to implement to better support at-risk student persistence to degree completion. I examined the experiences of students at one small, private, liberal arts institution who were identified as at-risk during the admissions process. The participants in this study faced a myriad of obstacles in their attempt to complete their degrees. Some were able to overcome those obstacles and some were not. Both educational outcomes inform this study and provide college and university administrators with solutions to consider to better support this growing group of students.

In this final chapter, I summarize my findings and discuss the implications of my study organized around two major themes: (1) obstacles to degree completion and (2) degree completion support. I propose recommendations for government agencies and college and university administrators and faculty. I then provide a statement of the limitations of my study and the potential for further research. Finally, I close the chapter with my concluding thoughts.

Summary of Findings

This qualitative study examined the educational experiences of students identified as at-risk during the college admissions process. Seven of the participants started college but did not complete a college degree. Six of the participants completed their college degrees. Each of the participants spoke of pre-college experiences, family influences, financial concerns, and classroom experiences influencing their college persistence. For some these factors supported their degree completion while for others they proved to be obstacles to obtaining a college degree. Some participants were products of school districts facing academic poverty which
affected their college readiness, while others lived in poverty themselves. All participants cited the need for curriculum and pedagogy reform to include more engaging teaching and learning formats. Whether the students persisted to graduation or not, all faced obstacles in their educational journey which requires attention to better support at-risk students’ persistence through their college education and ability to obtain a college degree.

**Discussions and Implications**

According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017), “almost 90 percent of high school graduates can expect to enroll in an undergraduate institution at some point during their young adulthood” (p. 1). Unfortunately, the graduation rates of some students entering college are not as optimistic, as “college access and attainment remains unequal” (Executive Office of the President, 2014). This data mirrors that of the site of my study and motivated me to speak directly with at-risk students in the hopes of discovering innovative solutions to the issue of college persistence.

The following discussions and implications reflect the findings and considerations resulting from a greater understanding of the experiences of at-risk students attempting to earn a college degree. I organized my findings, and therefore my discussions of implications stemming from my findings, around two major themes: (1) obstacles to degree completion and (2) degree completion support.

**Obstacles to Degree Completion**

My study illustrated significant obstacles to degree completion for students identified as at-risk from, the academic poverty experienced in their K-12 experience to the delivery of the college curriculum. The participants described educational experiences that not only influenced their ability to learn, but also their ability to remain motivated in school.
Rendon’s (2014) sentipensante pedagogy illustrates the deficiencies in current Western cultural teaching traditions used to determine and support educational success, which do not work for students identified as at-risk. The stories the participants told of their educational journey reinforced the need to shift from the traditional style of teaching formed for a dominant culture to a more inclusive approach that works for the diverse learning needs of the students higher education serves today. Time and again participants illustrated how academic poverty, lack of pre-college support, and curriculum delivery influenced their ability to be successful in college.

**Academic Poverty.** The participants shared various examples of the academic poverty they experienced from lack of classes in their urban and rural K-12 school districts. The school districts responsible for their academic readiness for both the college entrance exams and their transition to college. Many schools were not only deficient of the appropriate resources to offer upper-level college preparatory classes but also did not have the appropriate resources to support at-risk students’ navigation through the educational process in a format that best met their needs. This was particularly evident for students with disabilities. The U.S. education system’s inability to offer equitable K-12 experiences will continue to have a long-term effect on these students and their successful transition to college and their completion of a college degree. The inability to be academically prepared impacts a student’s motivation to succeed in college.

**Classroom Experiences.** A major sub-theme that emerged during this research is the need for curriculum delivery reform. Every participant in the study expressed concern over faculty who rely too much on PowerPoint to deliver the course content. Participants expressed concern over the teacher in front of the classroom reading off information from the slides with no classroom interaction, a practice hooks (1994) warns educators to avoid. The participants shared
their inability to be successful in classroom settings with this teaching model. On one occasion a participant first took a course with this transfer of knowledge (Freire, 1974) format, did poorly, re-took the class from a faculty member with a transformative approach to teaching and earned an A. In addition, participants expressed the classes in which they found the most success were discussion-based classes or classes in which included hands-on learning. Minimally, the participants shared, if the faculty member needs to read from the slides, it was more helpful if the slides were provided to students prior to class to take their own handwritten notes to help them remember the course materials.

A second major sub-theme that emerged from this research is for the desire for faculty to truly get to know their students. The participants expressed concern that faculty do not take enough time to understand the complicated nature of their lives and wanted faculty to know more about their situations so that faculty could properly refer them to resources on campus. When a student does not show up to class or not doing well, instead of assuming students do not care about the class, the participants wished the faculty member would take time to check in, make sure they are doing okay and assist them with getting back on track. Participants shared when they missed classes, their absence caused embarrassment and occasionally led to anxiety about returning to that class, worsening their situation. The participants felt that if the faculty reached out and expressed concern, students are more likely to return to class which Rendon (2009) suggests demonstrates an ethic of care.

All three of the theoretical frameworks highlighted in this study support these findings. Rendon (2009) encouraged a disregard for “privileging western structures of knowing and disconnecting faculty from the students” (p. 112) for a more well-rounded approach to teaching and learning. hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy supports the elimination of the hierarchical
nature of teaching and learning and encourages using their passion for their topic to encourage student learning. Smith (1998) encouraged multi-levels of advising to assist at-risk students through the hidden curriculum of higher education.

The stories the participants shared in this study hold far-reaching implications on academic success and persistence to a college degree. The participants who did persist to college degree completion demonstrated their ability to complete a college degree despite their at-risk status, which illustrates Rendon’s (2009) recommendation to move away from measuring a student’s ability to succeed based on test scores. Educators’ inability to value the whole student and the skills they bring to the classroom has long-term economic implications on the students themselves; additionally, ignoring students’ contributions can result in larger implications for the value of a diverse workforce and the strength of the overall economy.

**Recommendations**

In the next section, I offer recommendations to college and university administrators regarding classroom experiences of at-risk students based on the data collected from students at the site of this study. My recommendations will illustrate a need for innovative teaching styles and learning outcomes that do not solely rely on linguistical and mathematical acquisition of knowledge, the need to recognize and eliminate Western structures of knowledge and support and the development of peer and faculty mentorship programs.

**Student Motivation as a Measure of College Readiness**

Although college entrance exams can play a role in determining the support systems a student may need in college, test scores should not serve as the sole determination of whether a student will be successful in college. This study supports Rendon’s claim (2014) that there is more to a student than the linguistical and mathematical acquisition of knowledge. Instead, based on the findings of this single site study, I recommend universities adapt a process to
measure motivation. The influence of personal motivation highlights a clear and distinct difference between the participants who persisted to graduation in this study and those who did not graduate with a college degree. For those who did not persist, their motivation to attend college was often not their own. Some participants shared influence from family and friends to attend college even though they were not necessarily eager to go to college themselves. On the other hand, those that did persist to graduation were motivated by the challenges they faced from high school teachers who did not believe in their ability to attend college, to parents discouraging college attendance, to obstacles they faced while in college. The obstacles motivated them to persist and obtain their college degrees.

**Pedagogy Reform**

Students experience their classroom learning in a variety of ways. Some have navigated the traditional western learning culture while others struggled to succeed in a traditional “transfer of knowledge” learning environment (Freire, 1974). Rendon (2009) suggested that the act of moving away from the “old vision of teaching and learning is an act of dissent and resistance” (p. 112). Rendon (2009) also suggested faculty are aware of the benefits of change, but often resort to their old ways of teaching. As a result, if colleges and universities are committed to the issue of college persistence, I recommend institutions of higher education invest more resources into specific faculty development opportunities. Engaging in extended transformative professional development focused on pedagogy reform will help faculty set-aside their old ways of teaching and embrace an innovative model which supports academic success of a diverse student body. One such experience could be to engage in professional development focused on human centered design.

An instructor at the site of the study shared his experience at Darden School of Business (Stoked, 2018). The pedagogy reform focus of the workshop led to an experiment where he
walked in to the first day of class without a syllabus, presented the class with the learning outcomes of the course, and together the faculty member and the students designed the course. The course design process resulted in a positive learning experience for both the students and the faculty which is exactly what Rendon (2009), and hooks (1994) recommend. This level of pedagogy reform eventually takes on the apprenticeship level of mentorship as described by Smith (1998). The ability to partner with students and guide them through a transformative learning experience such as course development is an opportunity to practice apprenticeship. If more faculty participated in professional development opportunities with a focus on pedagogical reform, faculty may become more confident and willing to make the shift necessary to support student learning which is engaging for all students.

**Faculty and Student Engagement**

Ongoing faculty learning and scholarship is an established educational tradition required for tenure and strengthened Higher Learning Commission accreditation results (Higher Learning Commission, 2020; Kelskey, 2017). Although expectations vary from institution to institution, a typical requirement for tenure is “40% scholarship, 30% teaching and 30% service” (Kelskey, 2017, para. 3). Based on the finding of this study, I recommend including a specific faculty/student scholarly relationships category into this formula at a level equal to or higher than teaching and elevate both teaching and faculty/student scholarly relationships to the highest priority. Although faculty could include faculty/student scholarly relationships into the “teaching” category, pulling faculty/student engagement out and highlighting it as having very specific value would more effectively demonstrate the importance of these relationships as effective teaching skills. Doing so is crucial for the support and success of at-risk students as discovered through this research. Educators must support a student and their individual success which in turn will influence the success of their state, country and the world. In addition to
faculty/student scholarly relationships, financial aid for at-risk students needs to be addressed by institutions of higher education.

**Financial Aid**

Based on the data in this study, I recommend institutions explore incentive-based scholarships to keep at-risk student progressing towards graduation which will in turn improve the four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates for the entire institution. In many cases, financial aid for students tends to drop after their first year in college and the data in this study support an alternate approach for this group of students. Shifting curriculum reform and measurement of knowledge practices will take time, but in the short-term, I recommend an incentive program for students identified as at-risk to receive scholarships based on academic success year after year. If at-risk students earn a desired GPA, they should automatically receive additional scholarship money for the following year. This practice could shift a focus from working to pay for college to learning to pay for college. The incentive could encourage students to remain in college instead of stopping out for financial or personal reasons, which will have positive overall results for both the students and the institutions serving them.

Although an outlier in my research, Ruth’s narrative as a student with disabilities stands out as an easy solution to support this particular population of students. I recommend students who have an IEP in high school for cognitive learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, receive an accommodation on course load to retain their federal financial aid. The current system is set to incentivize students to earn their college degrees in four years by requiring students to minimally enroll in 12 credits. This practice negatively influences students who need more time to be successful in college. Ruth knew exactly what she needed (a reduced course load) to successfully complete her college degree. Unfortunately, she was also a low-income student and needed the financial aid to afford college. The current financial aid expectations negatively deter
at-risk students from ever completing their degrees. Addressing the financial aid situation for at-risk students will free up time for students to develop mentoring relationships with faculty, staff, and peers.

**Peer Mentorship**

The participants illustrated the need for both peer and faculty mentorship as described by Smith (2013). Institutions that are intentional about establishing advising, advocacy, and apprenticeship mentoring relationships for at-risk students will develop natural pathways for faculty, staff and students to unveil the hidden curriculum for at-risk students, as advised by Smith (2013). As Sabrina stated, “having a school program that says ‘we’re willing to help you and show that even though you’re not an ideal [student] on paper, there is something within you that is going to be great in school’” demonstrates an intentional program, such as LEAP and the Emerging Scholars Living-Learning Community, structured to provide advising and advocacy relationships proves supportive of this particular group of participants. This is affirmed when Sabrina stated, “I don’t think I would have been [this successful] in my academic career the way I was without LEAP”. Sabrina’s statements support the need for intentional programs supporting at-risk students and their transition to college.

Although the students who participated in the Emerging Scholars or LEAP program were more successful in year one and even year two in their college career, the continued low graduation rates support the need for an on-going model of mentorship far after the first year of college is necessary for this group of students. I recommend college and universities adopt a model which engages these students in mentoring opportunities after the first year of college. One such model could involve upper-class at-risk students in the mentor role in which they can support their first-year student peers enrolled in programs such as LEAP. Although this opportunity is available to three study advocates in the program at the site of this study,
expansion of this opportunity to a larger group of students could prove to continually engage students in mentorship opportunities after the first year of college. In addition, creating a more established pipeline of students to faculty mentors in their program of study would better support these students to degree completion. For at-risk students, it may be necessary to create a more intentional practice for this connection. Often, the scholarship and research opportunities for students are developed because of already established relationships between students and faculty (Smith, 2013), which can be an intimidating process for at-risk students, particularly for first-generation college students tasked with navigating the hidden curriculum of higher education.

Programs like LEAP and Emerging Scholars can have a positive influence on persistence for at-risk students. It seemed as if the students who did not persist to graduation did not have as much to say about the program leaving me to wonder if a different outcome would have been achieved had they been stronger participants. Whether students participate in programs or not, faculty and staff support can also have an influence on college persistence as demonstrated by the participant testimony supporting Smiths (2013) model of mentorship.

**Developing a Culture of Student Support**

Based on the literature and the data shared, it is evident that not one solution will support at-risk student degree completion. As a result, consideration should be given to update Smith’s (2013) model, as outlined in the literature review, to incorporate curriculum delivery reform and engaged pedagogy to Smith’s existing model of advising, advocacy, and apprenticeship. Participants in this study clearly called for a different way of teaching and learning, desired strong relationships with their faculty, and valued mentorship opportunities with both faculty and peers. Developing a holistic culture of student support will not only support the learning and degree completion of at-risk students but would also support the learning and degree completion of all students creating an equitable learning environment for the diverse student body educators
serve today. The data from this study support that each of these solutions on their own would support at-risk students, but a well-intentioned, well-rounded model of many of the recommendations supported by the participant data at the site of this study could revolutionize how higher education educates students. As a result, I recommend the following change to Smiths’ (2013) mentorship model, originally introduced in the analytical theory section of chapter two, as shown in Figure Two:

![Holistic Approach to At-Risk Student Support (adapted from Smith, 2013)](image)

*Figure 2. Holistic Approach to At-Risk Student Support (adapted from Smith, 2013)*

The revised model supports Smith’s (2013) current model of advising, advocacy and apprenticeship which, as supported by the participants in this study, is a strong model of mentorship for at-risk students. However, based on this research, a new model encompassing a holistic approach of support for at-risk students requires the addition of curriculum reform and
engaged pedagogy to support at-risk students needs for a more interactive classroom experience which encourages faculty-to-student engagement both in and outside of the classroom.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Although the stories of the participants in this study represent the at-risk student experience, definite limitations include the number of participants available to participate. In addition, the study was conducted at a single site and the opportunity to expand this research to various types of institutions across the country would likely unveil more areas of concern or obstacles to be addressed.

Despite the relatively low number of participants, the data gathered informs recommendations for future studies. First, I recommend the need to explore the relationship between high schools and colleges and how the two can work together to better support the transition of at-risk students to college. Many participants highlighted the support of programs such as College Possible but felt lost when this support did not continue through all four years of college. This leads to my second recommendation of future study which involves focusing on the differences in the success rates of at-risk students who attend colleges with a four-year student support plan in place versus those who do not have such a support system in place. Although many colleges and universities have strong first-year programs for this population of students, a more long-term approach may be necessary.

Additionally, the impact of faculty and staff of color on the persistence of students of color warrants further study. Due to the diverse participation sample, I was surprised only one participant expressed a desire for more interaction with faculty and staff of color during their college experience. Based on my experience working with student, the need for faculty and staff of color in the academe is a current priority for many institutions of higher education. Students
are requesting it and deserve to have role models who can relate to their lived experiences.

hooks (1994) illustrated that cultural educational norms influence the perception of who deserves power and privilege, which may prohibit a student from an under-represented group from even believing that having faculty and staff that look like them is even a possibility (Florence, 1998). This theory could explain why students did not even bring it up in the interview process. Two participants shared the value of engaging with diverse peers, but Patti was the only participant who mentioned the diversity of the faculty and staff.

Although the participants in this study did not identify increasing faculty and staff of color as a change required by colleges and universities, current literature demonstrates a diverse faculty and staff benefits students and their experience. Taylor, Apprey, Hill, McGrann and Wang (2010) stated,

women constitute almost 60 percent of U.S. college students, and because minorities will exceed 50 percent of the U.S. population before 2050, we must do a better job of preparing and hiring more persons from these groups for faculty positions in order to provide diverse role models for the nation’s changing demographics (para. 2)

In addition, Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster, stressed,

the faculty comprise the essential core of a college or university, its epicenter. In many ways the faculty epitomize the values of their institutions. They serve, too, in important ways as role models for their students; for that to occur for all students, diversity in the faculty ranks is crucial. (p.16)

Further study of this topic is needed to demonstrate the importance of a diverse faculty and staff to university officials and hiring managers. Finally, I recommend a study on educational funding
reform to discover effective steps to implement and eliminate academic poverty and provide more equitable resources for all K-12 students to be successful in college.

**Conclusion**

This study focused on the importance of hearing directly from the students affected by college persistence issues to inform recommendations for colleges and universities to consider to better support at-risk students. The data gained from this study may contribute to the creation of stronger support systems better suited to serve this population of students. In addition, the findings discussed here reveal how these students prefer to learn. New learning styles will require faculty development to ensure faculty understand the need for a teaching paradigm shift to make the change in their teaching and curriculum delivery.

I appreciate the transparency of the participants to help me understand the full picture of their successes achieved and their obstacles faced to inform this study. Through stories and dialogue educators can gain a better understanding of the unique obstacles at-risk students face while attempting their degree completion. I am amazed by the participants who were able to overcome these obstacles and successfully earn their college degrees. Their motivation to persist is admirable. For those who did not persist, their voices are even louder - higher education needs to change. Institutions no longer serve the same students for which higher education was originally developed. If the students are changing, higher education must also change. These participants have made a lot of sacrifices and overcome many obstacles to make it into college. At-risk students deserve higher education’s attention and willingness to overcome any obstacles in order to make true pedagogical change which will support their persistence to graduation for this population of students.
References


Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/Living-Learning-programs-one-high-impact-educational-practice-we


Appendix A

IRB Letter of Approval
Project Title: [1198940-1] Persistence of At-Risk Students in Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Heidi Anderson-Isaacson, MA

Submission Type: New Project

Date Submitted: April 11, 2018

Document Type: Decision Letter

Document Description: Project Approved

Publish Date: May 3, 2018

Should you have any questions you may contact Sarah Muenster-Blakley at muen0526@stthomas.edu.

Thank you,

The IRBNet Support Team
Appendix B

Recruitment Email to Students Who Persisted to Graduation
Greetings! My name is Heidi Anderson-Isaacson and I am currently enrolled in the Doctorate Program on Education, Leadership and Learning at the University of St. Thomas and am an employee at St. Catherine University. My research interests include factors that impact a college students’ ability to continue in their studies through graduation. As a student who was admitted to the University through the LEAP program and now nearing graduation, I am particularly interested in your thoughts about what contributed to your successful completion of college. Your participation in an interview will help me complete my research which could have an impact on how we deliver services to ensure student success not only at St. Catherine University, but hopefully at institutions of higher education across the country. Your participation is completely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. Your answers will be kept confidential as I will only share the aggregate data and will in no way reveal names connected to the data. The data will be gathered and stored on a secure server and will be deleted upon completion of the project. The risk to you is minimal and you will not be asked information that would reasonably identify you. I am happy to share my findings with you after the research is complete. As an appreciation for your efforts, all participants will receive a $5.00 gift card at the time of the interview. Thank you for the consideration of your time and for your contribution to my research. Please contact me if you are willing to participate so we can arrange for a meeting time. Also, if you have questions about my research, please contact me at hjanderson@stkate.edu or call me at 651-324-2361. Sincerely, Heidi Anderson-Isaacson
Appendix C

Recruitment Email to Students Who Did Not Persist to Graduation
Greetings! My name is Heidi Anderson-Isaacson and I am currently enrolled in the Doctorate Program on Education, Leadership and Learning at the University of St. Thomas and am an employee at St. Catherine University. My research interests include factors that impact a college students’ ability to continue in their studies through graduation. As an student who was admitted to the University through the LEAP program at St. Catherine University but is no longer enrolled at the University, I am particularly interested in your thoughts about what impacted your ability to stay enrolled at the University. I understand this can be a difficult topic to discuss, but please know that your contributions can help better support students in the future. Your participation in an interview will help me complete my research which could have an impact on how we deliver services to ensure student success not only at St. Catherine University, but hopefully at institutions of higher education across the country. Your participation is completely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. Your answers will be kept confidential as I will only share the aggregate data and will in no way reveal names connected to the data. The data will be gathered and stored on a secure server and will be deleted upon completion of the project. The risk to you is minimal and you will not be asked information that would reasonably identify you. I am happy to share my findings with you after the research is complete. As an appreciation for your efforts, all participants will receive a $5.00 gift card at the time of the interview. Thank you for the consideration of your time and for your contribution to my research. Please contact me if you are willing to participate so we can arrange for a meeting time. Also, if you have any questions about my research, please contact me at hjanderson@stkate.edu or call me at 651-324-2361. Sincerely, Heidi Anderson-Isaacson
Appendix D

Consent Form for Graduating Students
Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study about at-risk students and their ability to complete college. You were selected as a possible participant because you were designated as an at-risk student (LEAP) during the admissions process. You are eligible to participate in this study because you were a LEAP student and you are near completing your degree. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Heidi Anderson-Isaacson, Doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas and Director of Residence Life at St. Catherine University. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to identify how colleges and universities can best support at-risk students complete their college degree in a timely manner. This study is important because although many at-risk students are being admitted to college, the completion rates are low.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in one interview that will take approximately one hour.
2. Allow me to record our interview so that I may have it transcribed by a confidential transcribing service. The interview will be conducted in a conference room on the St. Catherine University campus.
3. Be available for follow-up clarifying questions that will take no longer than ten minutes and can be conducted either in person or over the phone if more convenient.
4. Approximately 120 people are expected to participate in this research and I expect to conduct about 25 interviews.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

Because I do not intend to share personal names or identifying information within my research, the risks will be minimal.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, your contribution to the study will directly benefit future students. At-risk students need a different level of organized
and intentional long-term support to ensure their persistence through college. In this study, I will explore obstacles facing at-risk students and how to best remove such obstacles. This study aims to assist colleges and universities across the country with strategies to support their own populations of at-risk students. This study will illustrate what strategic and systemic interventions can accomplish in improving the graduation rates of at-risk students.

You will receive a $5.00 Target gift card for participating in the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. The information that you provide in this study will be transcribed and stored on a secure computer. I will remove your name from the data and assign a code for each participant so that the information cannot be tied back to the participant. I and the research advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by December 2019. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. A professional transcriber bound by confidentiality will be hired to transcribe the recording. Once transcription is complete, the audio will be destroyed.

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in the any written reports or publications. If it becomes useful to disclose any of your information, I will seek your permission and tell you the persons or agencies to whom the information will be furnished, the nature of the information to be furnished, and the purpose of the disclosure; you will have the right to grant or deny permission for this to happen. If you do not grant permission, the information will remain confidential and will not be released.

The types of records I will create include audio recording of your interview, interview notes, transcripts, master lists with the associated code. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Though I will do everything I can to protect your confidentiality, State law and ethical standards require that I report any disclosure of the following to appropriate local or State authorities:

- Clear and imminent danger or harm to yourself or others, or
- Suspected or confirmed abuse or neglect of a child or a vulnerable adult.

We will keep information about you for future research about the persistence of at-risk students in higher education. We will only use aggregate information and will not use any identifiers in future research. There is no limit to the length of time we will store de-identified information, but if you choose to withdraw from the study your information will not be stored for future use.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Heidi Anderson-Isaacson, St. Catherine University or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say
so, and do not sign this form. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and you will be removed immediately. You may withdraw until the study is published, after which time withdrawal will no longer be possible.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Heidi Anderson-Isaacson. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (651)324-2361. If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Dr. Sarah Noonan at sjnoonan@stthomas.edu or Dr. Jayne Sommers at somm2720@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

**Statement of Consent**

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

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Appendix E

Consent Form for Student Who Did Not Persist to Graduation
Consent Form

[1198940-1] Persistence of At-Risk students in Higher Education

You are invited to participate in a research study about at-risk students and their ability to complete college. You were selected as a possible participant because you were designated as an at-risk student (LEAP) during the admissions process at St. Catherine University. You are eligible to participate in this study because you were a LEAP student and you did not complete your college degree. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Heidi Anderson-Isaacson, Doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas and Director of Residence Life at St. Catherine University. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to identify how colleges and universities can best support at-risk students complete their college degree in a timely manner. This study is important because although many at-risk students are being admitted to college, the completion rates are low.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

5. Participate in one interview that will take approximately one hour.
6. Allow me to record our interview so that I may have it transcribed by a confidential transcribing service. The interview will be conducted in a conference room on the St. Catherine University campus.
7. Be available for follow-up clarifying questions that will take no longer than ten minutes and can be conducted either in person or over the phone if more convenient.
8. Approximately 120 people are expected to participate in this research and I expect to conduct about 25 interviews.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

Because I do not intend to share personal names or identifying information within my research, the risks will be minimal.
There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, your contribution to the study will directly benefit future students. At-risk students need a different level of organized and intentional long-term support to ensure their persistence through college. In this study, I will explore obstacles facing at-risk students and how to best remove such obstacles. This study aims to assist colleges and universities across the country with strategies to support their own populations of at-risk students. This study will illustrate what strategic and systemic interventions can accomplish in improving the graduation rates of at-risk students.

You will receive a $5.00 Target gift card for participating in the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. The information that you provide in this study will be transcribed and stored on a secure computer. I will remove your name from the data and assign a code for each participant so that the information cannot be tied back to the participant. I and the research advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by December 2019. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. A professional transcriber bound by confidentiality will be hired to transcribe the recording. Once transcription is complete, the audio will be destroyed.

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in the any written reports or publications. If it becomes useful to disclose any of your information, I will seek your permission and tell you the persons or agencies to whom the information will be furnished, the nature of the information to be furnished, and the purpose of the disclosure; you will have the right to grant or deny permission for this to happen. If you do not grant permission, the information will remain confidential and will not be released.

The types of records I will create include audio recording of your interview, interview notes, transcripts, master lists with the associated code. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Though I will do everything I can to protect your confidentiality, State law and ethical standards require that I report any disclosure of the following to appropriate local or State authorities:

- Clear and imminent danger or harm to yourself or others, or
- Suspected or confirmed abuse or neglect of a child or a vulnerable adult.

We will keep information about you for future research about the persistence of at-risk students in higher education. We will only use aggregate information and will not use any identifiers in future research. There is no limit to the length of time we will store de-identified information, but if you choose to withdraw from the study your information will not be stored for future use.
Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Heidi Anderson-Isaacson, St. Catherine University or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and you will be removed immediately. You may withdraw until the study is published, after which time withdrawal will no longer be possible.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Heidi Anderson-Isaacson. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (651)324-2361. If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Dr. Sarah Noonan at sjnoonan@stthomas.edu or Dr. Jayne Sommers at somm2720@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_______________________________  ______________________________  __________________
Signature of Study Participant               Date

_______________________________
Print Name of Study Participant

_______________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Researcher               Date
Appendix F

Interview Questions for Students Who Persisted to Graduation
Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of the Interviewee

(Briefly describe the research and walk through consent)

Questions:

1. Describe your high school academic experience.
   a. What went well academically
   b. What obstacles or struggles did you face
2. When did it first occur to you that you should attend college…
   a. How did you come to that realization?
   b. Who had an influence positively or negatively on your decision to attend college?
3. As you thought about attending college, what concerns did you have about applying, acceptance, your transition to college and completing a college degree?
4. If you ever thought about leaving college, what kept you here?
5. As you approach graduation, looking back, what contributed towards your success?
   a. What obstacles did you face and how did you overcome them?
6. Sometimes parents are an influence on students’ educational choices. How can colleges and universities better inform parents of the educational and career options available for their student?
7. What practices can help professors and staff members assist students to overcome obstacles and be more successful in college?
8. Thinking about your classroom experiences, what environments or teaching styles were used in the classes you felt you were able to thrive? Not thrive?
9. How did a program like LEAP impact your college experience?
10. If you could give one piece of advice to a new LEAP student, what would it be?

Thanks for your participation and remind the participant of confidentiality and the possibility for follow-up questions.
Appendix G

Interview Questions for Students Who Did Not Persist to Graduation
Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of the Interviewee

(Briefly describe the research)

Questions:

1. Describe your high school academic experience.
   a. What went well academically
   b. What obstacles or struggles did you face
2. When did it first occur to you that you should attend college…
   a. How did you come to that realization?
   b. Who had an influence positively or negatively on your decision to attend college?
3. As you thought about attending college, what concerns did you have about applying,
   acceptance, your transition to college and completing a college degree?
4. Looking back on your college experience, what led you to leave prior completing your
   degree?
   a. What successes did you experience?
   b. What obstacles did you face and how did you handle them?
5. Sometimes parents are an influence on students’ educational choices. How can colleges
   and universities better inform parents of the educational and career options available for
   their student?
6. What practices can help professors and staff members assist students to overcome
   obstacles and be more successful in college?
7. Thinking about your college classroom experiences, what environments or teaching
   styles were used in the classes you felt you were able to thrive? Not thrive?
8. How did a program like LEAP impact your college experience?
9. If you could give one piece of advice to a new LEAP student, what would it be?

Thanks for your participation and remind the participant of confidentiality and the possibility for
follow-up questions.