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Traditional Student Perceptions and Experiences Contributing to Community College Persistence

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TRADITIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES CONTRIBUTING TO

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

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ABSTRACT

TRADITIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES CONTRIBUTING TO

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An increased effort to improve the retention percentages and number of college graduates

must address the unique characteristics and experiences of the traditional-aged community

college student population. Models of student departure and attrition seek to explain why a

student stops attending a college through the analysis of quantitative data. These data, whether

about student demographic characteristics, academic intent, institutional factors, motivational

factors, etc. are used abundantly to predict persistence and retention patterns of 4-year college

and university students. Perceptions and experiences of traditional-aged community college

students relating to persistence and retention is an area of higher education research with

insufficient coverage. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand, describe, and

interpret perceptions and experiences of traditional-aged community college students associated

with persistence. This study involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 15

participants to collect their experiences with continuing community college attendance from one

semester and one year to the next. The interviews were analyzed and themes were developed

using Moustakas's modification of van Kaam's method. Seven themes emerged from the study:

1) financial characteristics, including concern about cost, financial aid, and working while

enrolled, 2) early anxious thoughts, 3) undecided, 4) family support, 5) determination and self-

motivation, 6) on-campus engagement and involvement, including course experiences, professor

interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions, and 7) plans to

transfer. The study revealed that traditional-aged community college students face a number of factors in their decisions to persist. Although students may experience frustrations, setbacks and manage a number of responsibilities, their determination and self-motivation help them to reach their educational and career goals.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and extended family. Their moral and emotional support has shaped the person I have become. I want to share the special feeling of gratitude and accomplishment with my parents, Samuel and Debbie Rucker, and my sisters Ruth and Laura, who have always supported my educational pursuits.

I also dedicate this dissertation in honor and memory of my grandparents, Shirley J. Foley and the late Raymond A. Foley, and the late Dr. James H. Rucker, DDS and Juliette W. Rucker. I want to share a special thank you for being there for me during my entire educational journey, and cheering me on through your presence and spirit.

To my daughter, Juliette, thank you for being you and adapting to my crazy schedule to complete this project. May you always find joy in life and realize you can achieve anything you dream with hard work, dedication and persistence. Finally, to my husband, Ashley, thank you for your unwavering support, love, and faith. May we continue to share a lifetime of love, laughter, and joy.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In a 2009 address in Warren, Michigan, President Obama identified community colleges as the America's largest component of the higher education system. In the same address, President Obama unveiled the American Graduation Initiative, challenging America "to once again lead the world in college degrees by 2020" (White House, 2009). This initiative calls for community colleges to provide an additional 5 million graduates by 2020.

Such a challenge to America's community colleges will require institutions to revisit their current policies and practices as they relate to student persistence, retention, and degree completion. Enrollment in a two-year college accounts for nearly half of undergraduates in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). Although a key component of the community college mission is open access to a college education, most community college students do not graduate (Berkner, Horn & Clune, 2000; Horn, Nevill & Griffith, 2006; Horn & Premo, 1995; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Reasons why retention is low among this population of students is unclear (Pascarella, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Questioning why community college students fail to graduate yields a number of varied responses. Several studies suggest a variety of demographic factors influence student persistence, including age, ethnicity, family responsibility, and socioeconomic status (Brooks-Leonard, 1991; Cofer & Somers, 2001; Feldman, 1993; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton; 2002; Hawley & Harris, 2005; Hippensteel, St.John & Starkey, 1996; St.John & Starkey, 1994, Pascarella, Smart & Ethington, 1986). Similarly, several studies suggest financial factors such as employment status, tuition costs, and financial aid influence student persistence (Bers & Smith, 1991; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1992, Hey, Calderon & Seabert, 2003; Schmid & Abell, 2003;

Titus, 2006). Moreover, a number of studies explore the relationship of academic integration factors including student involvement, orientation, and student-faculty interaction to student persistence (Derby & Smith, 2004; Derby & Watson, 2006; Grosset, 1991; 1997; Halpin, 1990; Napoli & Wortman, 1998).

Fewer studies focus on the relationship of enrollment status to student persistence (Brooks-Leonard, 1991; Cofer & Somers, 2000; 2001; Feldman, 1993; Hippensteel, et al., 1996; Horn & Ethington, 2002; Jacobs & Berkowitz King, 2002; Schmid & Abell, 2003). Even fewer studies investigate persistence from the students' perspective, particularly their perceptions and experiences relating to their decisions to continue their education. This research aims to bridge the literature gap by exploring traditional-aged student experiences and perceptions associated with persistence and retention.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to investigate factors that encourage or discourage persistence among traditional-aged community college students from the student's point of view. This research will highlight experiences and perceptions, barriers, and supports associated with traditional-aged students persistence and retention decisions.

Problem Statement

A large portion of the prominent literature focuses on retention and persistence at the four-year institution (Astin, 1984, 1993; Bean, 1980, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1975, 1987). A smaller portion of the literature focuses on retention and persistence at the community college (Tinto & Russo, 1994; Tinto & Love, 1995; Tinto, 1999). Even still, most of this research focuses on student characteristics (demographic information), academic characteristics, economic characteristics (socioeconomic status), and even institutional

characteristics. However, few studies investigate the personal situations students experience, like family support, mental health status, relationship issues, drug (both alcohol and illicit) use, and non-academic expenses that preclude traditional-aged students from being able to attend college full-time (Solis, 1995).

Definitions

The following terms will be used as defined below throughout this study:

- Persistence: continued attendance at the same institution, enrolled in one or more credits from one semester to the next.

- Retention: continued attendance at the same institution enrolled in one or more credits from one academic year to the next.

- Community college: "A regionally accredited institution of higher education that offers the associate degree as its highest degree" (Vaughan, 2006).

- Virginia Community College System (VCCS): Virginia's state community college system consisting of 23 community colleges.

- First Time In College (FTIC): students enrolling in their first semester of college, does not include dual enrollment students or students who have enrolled at another higher education institution.

- Full-time student (FT): a student enrolled in at least twelve (12) credit hours per semester.

- Part-time student (PT): a student enrolled in one to eleven (1-11) credit hours per semester

- Traditional-aged student: a student between the ages of 18-24 (Choy, 2002).

- First generation college students: students who are the first in their families to enroll in higher education.

Research Questions

Research questions explored in this study will include:

1) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that encourage or discourage persistence?

2) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that are perceived as barriers while enrolled?

3) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that are perceived as supports while enrolled?

Research Design

Participants

The sample included a minimum of fifteen first-time-in-college (FTIC) students who attended the same community college in the fall 2014, and continued their enrollment at the same college in the spring 2015 semester. Participants were selected based on purposeful, criterion-based sampling by contacting members of various student services offices located at the researched institution.

Measures and Analysis

To best evaluate the research questions in this study, I used a qualitative research approach grounded in the phenomenology tradition to explore student experiences and perceptions that encourage or discourage them continue enrollment and retained. Interviews were scheduled, conducted, and recorded at the convenience and with the consent of the participants. Once the interviews were completed, I asked the participants to member-check the transcripts of

their interviews to make sure the essence of their responses to the interview questions was accurately captured. I then reviewed and coded the interview transcripts to identify the non-repetitive, meaningful information contained within. Then, I used rich and thick description to report the findings from the interviews. I collected and used demographic data describe the participants in this study.

Delimitations

This study focused on the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students attending one community college located in the Southeastern region of the United States. The study included only FTIC students enrolled as a full-time student during the 2014-2015 academic year. Students who transferred into the college or students completing dual enrollment coursework were excluded from the sample. Additionally, non-traditional aged students, defined as students above the age of 24 as of their first semester of attendance, were excluded from this research. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine the perceptions and experiences of traditional-aged community college students regarding their experiences with continued attendance and persistence. Another delimitation is that the study was not based on the actual student achievement data, including grades, degree progress and GPA.

Limitations

This study examined the perceptions and lived experiences of FTIC, traditional-aged community college students. Particularly, persistence among traditional-aged community college students whose enrollment represents their first time in college, and excluded students who are non-traditional-aged and any students who have attended and transferred credits from another higher education institution. Due to the selection criteria for participants, generalizations of the

results of this study may not be applicable to other settings including public or private 4-year colleges and universities.

Other limitations of this study included the research design and the researcher's current involvement with the institution. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative studies using purposeful criterion-based sampling have limited generalizability compared to quantitative studies with large sample size that utilize random sampling. One particular limitation with the research design involved the use of interview data, particularly the difficulty of conveying students' perceptions and experiences through interview transcripts. To address this limitation the researcher involved the participant in member checking, and used thick rich descriptions to generate understanding. The nature of the interview research allowed the participant to describe their experience and perceptions with respect to elements associated with student persistence such as type of course (in person versus online), grade point average (GPA), participation in institution sponsored extra-curricular activities (athletics, student clubs), and external influences as they affected their unique experience.

As a communications instructor with additional experience working in student services offices, the researcher has closely interacted with the studied population and may have developed assumptions and biases about traditional-aged community college students. To address this limitation, before interviews, transcript analysis and evaluation, the researcher bracketed any biases and assumptions to ensure personal experiences did not cloud the interpretation of the interview data. In addition the researcher ensured that participants have not previously enrolled, or are not currently enrolled in any course taught by the researcher.

Significance

This study focused on a timely and critical issue important to colleges and universities throughout the country. It adds to research identifying factors that contribute to traditional-aged students' persistence and degree completion by examining their lived experiences, providing a voice and a story that corresponds to the statistical inferences abound in much of the existing research on student persistence and retention. Identifying themes central to students' experiences, will help clarify what factors encourage student success, so institutions can further study ways to bridge the gap and help move students toward degree completion. Knowledge of experiences and this study's analysis will be critical to college administrators and policy makers who develop programs and incentives to promote and encourage student persistence. For faculty teaching these students and staff interacting with these students, this study will increase their awareness of factors that contribute to a student's success.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a broad introduction to the focus of this current study. The next chapter will provide a review of the literature with emphasis on the history of the American community college, and student retention and persistence research, and factors contributing to attrition, involvement and departure. The third chapter details the methodology used in conducting this research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will provide a brief history of the community college as an American higher education institution, intertwined with a brief history of federal aid programs. Next, this chapter will focus on research involving community colleges and retention including literature and community college students. The literature review will culminate with recent studies related to traditional community college students.

Rise of the Community College

According to *The Community College Story*, an American community college is defined as, "A regionally accredited institution of higher education that offers the associate degree as its highest degree" (Vaughan, 2006, p.1). The 1901 founding of Joliet Junior College in Joliet, Illinois, the first community college, marked the beginning of a new era in American higher education (Vaughan, 2006). At first, community colleges were considered extensions of high schools or branches of colleges and universities (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Levinson, 2005; Vaughan, 2006). Several instances of federal involvement during the twentieth century spurred the development and growth of community colleges.

Passage of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the G.I. Bill), which gave returning World War II veterans the opportunity for postsecondary education. As a direct result of the G.I. Bill, nearly 8 million World War II veterans received educational benefits; approximately 2.2 million enrolled in colleges and universities, and many more opted for vocational training below the college level (Mettler, 2005). The GI Bill represents the first federal government intervention aimed at reducing the cost of attending a higher education institution in the United States (Hatfield, 2003; Wilkinson, 2005).

In 1947, President Truman developed the President's Commission on Higher Education. Recommendations from the Commission, later referred to as the Truman Commission Report, encouraged what has become the most unique component of the community college mission, meeting the needs of the local community. The Truman Commission Report set the stage for massive growth in the number and impact of community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). The Truman Commission Report encouraged the expansion of the community college system, by endorsing increased accessibility for students from middle-class backgrounds and proposing substantial amounts of financial aid to academically qualified students. Nine years later, community colleges continued to receive presidential recognition as President Eisenhower's Committee on Education Beyond the High School heralded the significance of the community college and its role of providing access to higher education (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Within twenty years, the number of community colleges in the United States doubled (Cohen & Brawer, 2006).

From 1965 to 1992 the development of equal opportunities of access to higher education occurred largely through the development and promotion of federal financial aid programs (Vaughan, 2006). The Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) established federal student aid programs aimed at providing educational opportunities for low-income students, and focused on removing barriers to higher education (Mumper, et al., 2011). Subsequent amendments to the HEA during the 1970s and 1980s continued to expand federal student aid eligibility, centralized the financial aid programs, and renamed the need-based grant program and the student loan program to the Pell Grant program and the Stafford Loan program, respectively (Altbach, 2001; Mumper, et al., 2011).

With the cost of college attendance on the rise and the increasing number of students receiving Pell grants despite no significant increase in program funding, the political and economic climate of the 1980s compelled more students to borrow from the federal student loan program (Mumper, et al., 2011). As a result, the student loan program experienced rapid expansion at a greater rate than the Pell grant program. With the change in program dominance, the federal student aid programs provided less assistance to the neediest students and more assistance to the less needy. (Mumper, et al., 2011).

The 1990s brought about more changes to federal financial aid programs in the spirit of increasing student access. The Higher Education Amendments of 1992 established a free, centralized application for federal student aid programs known as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, also called FAFSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Often referred to as the Student Loan Reform Act of 1993, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (1993) established the William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan Program (referred to as Direct Loan), which lends money to students and their parents through a post-secondary education institution participating in the program (Federal Student Aid, 2012). In 1997, the FAFSA became available online, marking the shift to electronic applications (FinAid, n.d.).

The Higher Education Reconciliation Act of 2005 cut $12.7 billion from federal student aid programs, set Stafford loans to fixed interest rates, and set the maximum annual Pell grant award amount to $4,050 (FinAid, n.d.). The federal student aid programs faced numerous changes between 2005 and 2010 including changes to maximum award amounts, a reduction in interest rates for the Stafford Loan programs, efforts to streamline and encourage online completion of the FAFSA, and the provision of additional funding for the Federal Work-Study program (FinAid, n.d.).

Elements Of The Community College Mission

The advent of the community college in 1901 and efforts throughout the twentieth century by the federal government to increase affordability has provided greater access to higher education for the American citizenry. Two major elements of community college missions include providing open access and a comprehensive curriculum to individuals in the communities they serve (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Vaughan, 2006).

Community colleges enroll nearly half of students entering higher education through the open access or open admission element of their missions (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; AACC, 2014). Open access or open admission policies provide individuals including those from low-income, minority, and academically unprepared backgrounds pathways for higher education attainment (Choy, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2006). Cohen and Brawer (2006) contend that community colleges "have always tended to let everyone in but have then guided students to programs that fit their aspirations an din which they have some chance to succeed" (p. 256). As a result of open access missions community colleges serve a greater number of students from more diverse backgrounds than those populations attending four-year institutions (Choy, 2002).

A second element of the traditional community college mission includes a comprehensive curriculum: providing transfer programs, occupational and technical programs, developmental education programs, and workforce development programs (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Vaughan, 2006). These components function to provide comprehensive access to higher education, serve community needs, and help students achieve their goals.

College transfer programs offer opportunities to students seeking to complete bachelor's degree programs (Vaughan, 2006). Following the theme of access to higher education, community college transfer programs often feature liberal arts and general education components

when compared to occupational and technical programs (Cohen & Brawer, 2006). In examining the community college transfer mission, one key point Townsend and Wilson (2006) raise is that for some students, beginning postsecondary education at a four-year institution is not feasible due to increased tuition costs, and family or job responsibilities. An examination of transfer and enrollment rates between 1984 and 2002 at private and public higher education institutions reveals that students from the lowest levels of socioeconomic status represent less than 2% of students transferring to prestigious institutions (Dowd, 2011; Dowd, Cheslock & Meguzio, 2008). For economically disadvantaged students, the transfer mission of the community college prepares them for furthering their education and provides them access to baccalaureate degree attainment.

Occupational programs, also termed technical, vocational, or career programs, constitute a second component of the community college comprehensive curriculum. Preparing students for the American workforce a, part of the original community college mission, has a long history with the community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Vaughan, 2006). The provision of training for nursing, fire science, information technology and similar workforce-focused programs at community colleges gives students the opportunity to secure gainful employment without the requirement of seeking and completing a bachelor's degree program.

In contrast to the transfer function of the comprehensive curriculum, the occupational/technical education component tends to serve more students from under-represented, non-traditional, financially independent, currently employed, and low-income groups (Bragg, 2013). Discussing of the role of the community college in career and technical education, Bragg (2013) maintains that among students seeking certificates in occupational or technical programs, minority and low-income students are most prevalent. This review of data

highlights the importance of work to improve access for the traditionally under represented and under served populations of students in the American higher education landscape.

Another major component of the comprehensive curriculum includes developmental education. An immediate assumption about those in need of developmental education is that this need is due to poor preparation (Cohen & Brawer, 2006). However, developmental education also serves students seeking retraining for better-paying jobs, and those that have delayed their postsecondary education that may need refresher pre-college coursework prior to attempting college level courses (Vaughan, 2006). According to the AACC (2013), community college students make up 45% of undergraduate students in the United States.

Workforce development programs, another feature of the comprehensive curriculum offered by community colleges, help students, employers, businesses, and private industries compete globally. Similar yet different from the occupational and technical education function of the comprehensive curriculum, community college workforce development units have the flexibility to quickly respond to business and industry demands, are able to maintain relationships with private sector organizations, and create training and professional development programs for employees (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Vaughan, 2006). Workforce development's role and impact in contributing to the comprehensive curriculum of community colleges is most apparent through the literacy, academic, and technical skills preparation, and proven experience working with adult learners (Friedel, 2008; Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006). For economically disadvantaged students and students from underrepresented populations, access to workforce development programs that quickly prepare students for licensures, certifications, and highly skilled employment opportunities are key benefits. Combined with presidential and legislative efforts the two major features of the community

college mission, providing open access and a comprehensive curriculum, have resulted in community colleges gaining a greater percentage of incoming students.

Realities of Community College Enrollment, Persistence and Retention

Community college enrollment accounts for nearly half of all students entering higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; AACC 2014). For the fall 2013 semester, more than 12 million students were enrolled at a community college, representing 46% of all U.S. undergraduate students. First-generation college students, or students who are the first in their families to go to college made up 36% of community college enrollments. The average age of a community college student is 28 (AACC, 2014). Students less than 21 years of age represent 37% of credit-seeking community college students; 49%, were between the ages of 22 and 39; and 14% were age 40 and over (AACC, 2014).

Defining Retention and Persistence

The discussion of community college student retention and persistence is somewhat muddied, and yet remains important to studies of community college effectiveness and college funding mechanisms. Wild and Ebbers (2002) highlight the issues associated with defining retention and persistence for community colleges. They identify that definitions associated with retention used in academia today were developed in university settings. Wild and Ebbers (2002) also detail the varying definitions of retention applied to community colleges ranging from on-time graduation, program completion, and persistence rates paired with academic achievement. Wild and Ebbers (2002) encourage community colleges to develop their own definitions of student retention that fall within guidelines set by the state in which they operate.

In her 2005 research, Hagedorn identified four basic types of retention: (1) an institutional rate measured fall to fall, (2) a rate measured within a system, (3) a

discipline/program rate, and (4) a rate based on the particular course. Hagedorn (2005) argues that measuring an institution's retention rates is difficult because it is not always easy to obtain each type of data. While identified and used throughout educational research, Hagedorn's (2005) types of retention are different than those used to identify federal retention and persistence rates, and overall student success rates.

A review of any U.S. higher education institution's profile tracked through the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics *College Navigator* reveals several categories of data including tuition and fees, financial aid awards, enrollment, and retention and graduation rates. The publicly available information under retention and graduation rates for community colleges includes first-to-second year retention rates, overall graduation rates and transfer-out rates, and graduation rates by time to completion. For community colleges, the U.S. Department of Education documents "graduation rates refer to first-time, full-time students receiving associate's degrees or certificates from their initial institution of attendance only" (2015). Recognizing that not all students complete within the normal amount of time, the Department of Education also measures graduation rates for extended amounts of time including 150%, or 3 years for a 2-year program, and 200%, or 4 years for a 2-year program. Within this measure, retention rates for part-time students, students who transfer in, and students who transfer out are not included.

Although community college success rates are measured by persistence and completion benchmarks set by the U.S. Department of Education, they do not address the student's perspective. Proponents of community college education argue that measurements of student success should also incorporate a student's intent, or reasons why a student chooses to attend a community college. Voorhees and Zhou (2000) examined the links among student

characteristics including basic demographics, academic status, meaning completed credits and current enrollment status, institution type and perceptions of goal attainment identified through a statewide student intentions survey. Voorhees and Zhou (2000) had four key findings: 1) students earning more credits were more likely to indicate they were meeting their goals; 2) younger students indicated a higher level of goal attainment; 3) after initial enrollment, 73% of students in the study changed their goals at least once; 4) the longer students spent at the community college, the more likely they were to shift their goals.

Popular Student Retention and Persistence Theories

There are several competing theories that attempt to explain student persistence. (Chickering, 1969; Astin 1975; Bean 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987; Tinto 1999; St. John, 2006). Some retention theories suggest retention is a result of enrollment management practices (Kneflecamp, Widick, Parker & Associates, 1978; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whit, 2005; St. John, 2006) while others explain student persistence is a factor of individual characteristics (Bean, 1990; Pascarella & Tenrenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1999). Three theoretical models have garnered much attention in studying persistence: Tinto's Student Departure Model (1975, 1987), Astin's Student Involvement Model (1984, 1993), and Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980, 1985).

Student Departure Model

Tinto's early research (1975) explored how interactions between a student and institution affects whether a student continues to attend (persists) or drops out of (departs) higher education. Tinto (1975) found two primary factors of integration, academic and social, that influence whether a student completes a degree program. When a student is more involved with the campus social environment and the classroom's academic environment, persistence is more

likely with higher levels of commitment. In exploring the tenants of Tinto's (1975) research,

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) found that institutional factors including peer-group interactions,

faculty interactions, faculty concern for student development and teaching, and institutional and

goal commitments were correlated with student persistence, accounting for 44.45 % of variance

in the persistence model. Later, Tinto's research included the development of a Longitudinal

Model of Institutional Departure (1987) exploring students' academic (high school

performance), non-academic (gender and race), and financial (family social status) factors.

Tinto's research on student departure focuses on student characteristics and environmental

factors. Ultimately, Tinto suggests that as students begin college, a number of factors including

previous academic performance, personal expectations, and academic and social involvement on

campus affect whether students persist.

Tinto's later research explores persistence at community colleges where student

characteristics differ from students attending four-year institutions. Because community college

students commute from home and work to class, Tinto discovered that social and academic

engagement occurring in classrooms is imperative for student persistence (Tinto & Russo, 1994;

Tinto & Love, 1995). Toward the end of the twentieth century, Tinto began to recognize two

additional external factors, a student's financial situation, and the student's experience during the

first year in college, that impact whether a student persists toward degree completion (Tinto,

1999).

Student Involvement Model

Astin's Student Involvement Model centers on student development during their college

experience and how that impacts retention. The basic tenants of Astin's research asserts that

three main elements influence student persistence and retention: 1) student demographics and

prior experiences, 2) environment including student experiences during college, and 3) student characteristics including knowledge, attitudes and beliefs after college (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Astin explains that students' environments influence a student, and therefore influences student outcomes (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000). As Astin (1984) conceptualized this process, "student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). Therefore, the more time and energy a student invests in their academic experience, and the more involved a student is in their campus experience, the more the student will learn and achieve in their post-secondary education journey. Astin's work has been supported in more recent literature by Benjamin (2002), who found that when high numbers of adjunct faculty provided instruction, students were less integrated with the college.

Student Attrition Model

In a way much different from the Tinto and Astin models, Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980, 1985), which focuses on student intent, was developed through the use of organizational theories of turnover, specifically employee attrition. Bean's (1980, 1985) model highlighted the importance of student background characteristics, including socioeconomic status, distance from home, and prior academic performance, and student satisfaction to determine or predict student departure. Similar to Tinto and Astin, Bean's theories were developed by examining traditional college students living on-campus attending a four-year institution. One shortfall, however, is that Bean's research is difficult to connect with community college students, as they tend to be older, attend part-time, live off-campus, and commute to class (Cohen & Brawer, 2006).

Community College Student Retention and Persistence

Factors Contributing to Community College Student Departure, Involvement and Attrition

Community college retention and persistence research remains insufficient. Nearly 51% of students enrolled in higher education attend community colleges (AACC, 2014), yet researchers have difficulty explaining why the majority of community college students fail to complete credentials within five years (Rosenbaum, Diel-Amen, & Person, 2006). As previously discussed, several theories and models probe college student persistence and retention, but fail to look specifically at community college student retention.

Most retention and persistence literature attempts to apply one of Tinto, Astin or Bean's theories to a specific student population: traditional, residential students attending a four-year college or university. As a result the vast amount of quantitative research in the field suggests a number of factors are related to or influence student persistence; among them demographic, financial, and academic integration characteristics.

Because community college students are fundamentally different than traditional, residential students attending a four-year college or university, many unique factors may affect community college student persistence including students' personal aspirations (Bers & Smith, 1991; Feldman, 1993; Gates & Creamer, 1984; Mutter, 1992), and individual characteristics like age, ethnicity, and gender (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007; Feldman, 1993; Gates & Creamer, 1984; Mendoza, et al., 2009; Voohrees, 1987). External factors including socio-economic status (Bers & Smith, 1991; Fike & Fike, 2008 ;Gates & Creamer, 1984), high school background (Berkner, Horn & Clune, 2000; Calcagno, et al., 2007; Feldman 1993; Gates & Creamer, 1984; Grimes & David, 1999), financial aid (Fike & Fike, 2008; Ishitani, 2006) parent's education (Fike & Fike, 2008; Ishitani, 2006), using support services provided by the

institution (Fike & Fike, 2008), enrollment status (Fike & Fike, 2008), and participation in community college athletics (Mendoza, et al., 2009) also affect community college student persistence. Berkner, Horn & Clune (2000) include delaying enrollment beyond a year after high school, enrolling as a part-time student, having children, or being a single parent among a list of risk factors that can contribute to students' departure decisions.

Student Characteristics. Demographic factors, including age, ethnicity, family responsibility and socioeconomic status influence student persistence (Brooks-Leonard, 1991; Cofer & Somers, 2001; Feldman, 1993; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton; 2002; Hawley & Harris, 2005; Hippensteel, St. John & Starkey, 1996; St. John & Starkey, 1994, Pascarella, Smart & Ethington, 1986). Other researchers have discovered a link between financial factors such as employment status, tuition costs, and financial aid influence student persistence (Bers & Smith, 1991; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1992; Hey, Calderon & Seabert, 2003; Schmid & Abell, 2003; Titus, 2006; Wessel, Bell, McPherson, Costello & Jones, 2006).

Financial Characteristics. Although federal financial aid programs including the Pell grant, Stafford Loan, and Work-Study program have been around for nearly 60 years, the study of how these federal financial aid programs impact student persistence is relatively new and considerably sparse when compared to other areas of social science research. Only within the last 20 years have researchers studied how the ability to pay college costs affect student persistence (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Hippensteel, St. John & Starkey, 1996), how state aid programs affect community college student persistence (Mendoza, et al., 2009), and how various forms of federal financial aid affect student persistence (Avery & Turner, 2012; Braunstein, McGrath, & Pescatrice, 2001; Dowd & Coury, 2006; Dynarski, 2003; Mendoza, et al., 2009;

Nora, 1990; Perna, 1998; Robb, Moody, & Abdel-Ghany, 2012; Rothstein & Rouse, 2007; Wessel, Bell, McPherson, Costello & Jones, 2006).

Cabrera, et al., (1992) examine the role of finances with respect to student persistence. Specifically they explore student satisfaction with financial support, and the receipt of financial aid. Their longitudinal study at a large public urban commuter institution found no direct effect on persistence. However, the receipt of financial aid, when coupled with other variables including academic integration, socialization, and student desire to persist, had a significant total affect on student persistence (Cabrera, et al., 1992).

Hippensteel, St. John, and Starkey (1996) analyzed data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study of 1987 (NPSAS) in order to learn more about adult students attending two-year colleges. They found that tuition cost negatively affected within-year student persistence, and that all types of federal financial aid available to students did not mitigate the cost enough to affect student persistence.

Mendoza et al. (2012) examined the impact of state and federal financial aid and participation in athletic programs on students' retention longitudinally. A student dataset accounting for Oklahoma community college students who completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) with students' reporting their receipt of athletic scholarships was used by Mendoza et al. (2012) to create statistical models for regression analysis. The Mendoza et al. (2012) findings revealed that females were more likely than males to persist to sophomore standing in one year, athletes were more likely to persist than non-athletes, White males not receiving a financial aid package with a high grade point average and income greater than $40,000 were also more likely to persist than their athlete and non-athlete peers. Mendoza, et al. (2012) research also indicated consistency with the literature and found that when considering

the financial aid packages, income is a predictor of student retention, and those with less income were less likely to be retained.

In a study exploring the impact of income and financial aid offers on college enrollment decisions, Braunstein, McGrath & Pescatrice (1999) observed that financial aid had a positive impact on enrollment. Specifically, they learned that as the financial aid award amount increases by $1,000, the probability of enrollment also increased by between 1.1% and 2.5%. In a later study exploring the impact of financial factors including financial aid awards on student persistence at the same four-year institution, Braunstein, et al. (2001) found that low-income students with a low first-year GPA do not persist. The Braunstein, et al. (2001) study also highlighted that financial aid did not significantly impact freshman persistence, a clear conflict of their initial findings relating to enrollment decisions. In their summary, Braunstein, et al (2001) suggest the conflicting results could be attributed to the stability associated with receiving a financial aid award as long as students maintain their academic performance. One of the shortcomings of the Braunstein, et al. (2001) study is that they suggest that students performing poorly tend to drop out, but do not identify or study what happens if a student's application for financial aid is denied after their first award and they continue enrollment.

Dynarski (2003) reviewed how the elimination of the Social Security benefits impacted college attendance and completion. She found that the elimination of the benefit reduced the probability of student attendance by more than one-third. Additionally, this research revealed that an offer of $1000 in grant aid increases college attendance by 3.6 percent. Ultimately, Dynarski (2003) suggests that there is a strong and positive overall effect of grant aid on enrollment.

Highlighting the suggested link between collegiate attainment and future wages, Avery & Turner (2012) explored whether undergraduate college students are borrowing enough or too little based on analysis of college cost and the return on investment. Findings suggest that college attainment is worth the investment and that students are not over-borrowing (Avery & Turner, 2012). Although not directly related to student loans and persistence, England-Siegerdt (2011) investigated what types of financially needy students are more likely to borrow student loans. England-Siegerdt (2011) found that first-generation students, females, students dependent on their parents, and students that are of Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or American Indian descent are more likely to borrow student loans.

Dowd and Coury (2006) analyzed 1994 Beginning Postsecondary Student survey data to predict the impact of borrowing unsubsidized student loans on community college student persistence. Most concerning of the Dowd and Coury (2006) findings is that students who borrow a loan in their first year are less likely to be retained to the second year than those who do not borrow in their first year.

Stampen and Cabrera (1986, 1988) examined whether the type of financial aid a student received affected persistence. Stampen and Cabrera (1986, 1988) divided students into four groups: those receiving no financial aid; students receiving need-based financial aid (Pell Grants and Direct Student Loans), non-need aid (Guaranteed Student Loans); and non-need students that received merit-based aid. The 1986 research found no difference in the likelihood of attrition among the groups (Stampen and Cabrera). The 1988 research focused on the distribution of financial aid and student stability within the financial aid groups and findings included a low attrition rate for work-study students. Stampen and Cabrera (1988) findings also demonstrate that

as a student's financial need decreases, financial aid packages included increases in loans and work-study appointments.

Olivas (1985) explored financial aid award packaging and the relationship with student persistence among disadvantaged Hispanic students. Among the findings, the Olivas research highlights the small amount of financial aid awarded to Hispanic students, and that work-study, and loans were components of financial aid award packages for Hispanic students at all institution types, and all income levels. Additionally, Olivas (1985) posits that different types of financial aid influence student persistence. Work-study participation, Olivas concludes, "seems to improve the likelihood that students will remain in school, perhaps because the regular earnings require students to budget their money (whereas grants made in lump sum do not force such frugality), or because the contact with a supervisor makes students feel a part of the system, or because a meaningful skill is acquired" (1985, p. 471)

Another study of the influence of financial aid awards on student persistence concludes that students receiving financial aid awards tend to be enrolled longer and persist to graduation (Nora, 1990). Nora (1990) also found that the greater the number of credits a student was enrolled and the greater the amount of the financial aid award, were more likely to persist. Additionally Nora's (1990) research suggests that the receipt of any type of financial aid award positively impacts student persistence. While a great deal of research investigates the influence of financial aid programs on student persistence, there is little research exploring the topic specific to community colleges.

Attendance Status. Research conducted on the role of attendance status, whether the student is enrolled full-time or part-time and sometimes referred to as enrollment intensity, reveals that persistence is more likely among full-time students than part-time students (Cofer &

Somers, 2000; Feldman, 1993; Horn & Ethington, 2000; Jacobs & Berkowitz King, 2002; Schmid & Abell, 2003).

Using the National Post-Secondary Aid Survey data from 1996 *(*NPSAS:96), Cofer & Somers (2000) investigated within-year persistence rates of community college students. Specifically Cofer and Somers (2000) wanted to compare the effect of financial aid on persistence. Cofer and Somers (2000) found that persistence was 28.48% more likely among full-time students than those attending part-time. Cofer and Somers (2000) also reported students over the age of 30 were 6.23% more likely to persist than students between the ages of 22 and 30, and that students considered dependent for financial aid purposes were 9.72% more likely to persist than independent students.

Horn and Ethington (2002) researched students' perceived progress in four areas: mathematics, science and technology, communication skills, personal and social development, and perspectives of the world. They used the Community College Student Experience Questionnaire (CCSEQ) for their study. The authors explored differences in perceived gains based on ethnic group, attendance status, and whether the ethnic group differences depended on attendance status. Results of the Horn and Ethington (2002) study indicated differences in perceived growth between ethnic groups and attendance status, but differences in perceived growth between ethnic groups were not dependent on their enrollment status. In both the literature review and the discussion section of their article, Horn and Ethington (2002) consider and then attribute the differences in perceived gains to the level of engagement, arguing that part-time students are often less engaged in academic and social support systems.

Jacobs and Berkowitz King, in their 2002 study, examine the age and effects of background attributes on bachelor's degree attainment among women aged 15-44 based on data

collected in the National Survey of Family Growth. The data in the Jacobs and Berkowitz King (2002) study suggests a higher completion percentage for students who enroll full-time directly after high school completion. Apparently, enrolling part-time presents a barrier to completion. Jacobs and Berkowitz King (2002) asserted a delay between high school graduation and the start of college reduces the likelihood of degree completion, but that "part-time enrollment is the principal cause of lower completion rates at older ages" (p. 225).

Cofer and Somers (2000), Horn and Ethington (2002), and Jacobs and Berkowitz King (2002) analyze persistence and retention at a macro level, exploring the effects of some variable on degree attainment and student success, including academic status or enrollment intensity as a predictor variable. Their findings relating to attendance status are identified based on statistical analysis of a variety of national or statewide surveys, whereas Feldman (1993) and Schmid and Abell (2003) explore the effects of variables on persistence and student success at individual community colleges.

Analyzing persistence and retention at a rural community college using quantitative methods, Feldman (1993) found that attendance status was a predictor of retention: students enrolled part-time were 2.23 times more likely to drop out than students enrolled full-time. Feldman (1993) also reported that the strongest predictor of retention was high school GPA. When examined alone, most of the factors in the Feldman (1993) study were related to persistence, but when controlling for the other factors, the results indicated that attendance status, age, high school GPA and ethnicity were the strongest predictors of retention.

Exploring persistence and retention among three different cohorts, Schmid and Abell (2003) administered one survey to non-returning students, a second survey to continuing students, and a third survey to graduating students. Each survey had a specific focus, but each

also contained twelve questions to expose demographic risk factors, study patterns and campus involvement patterns among the cohort. Schmid and Abell (2003) reported that students enrolled part-time accounted for 78% of the non-returning students, 58% of the current students and 47% of the graduating students.

Despite differences in the studies that explore attendance status as a factor contributing to persistence and retention, a prominent finding is that full-time enrollment is strongly associated persistence, retention and completion. This suggests that regardless of whether the institution is a 2-year or 4-year college or university, attendance status is an important factor in predicting student persistence.

Developmental Education and Persistence. College preparedness and ultimately college completion, is not just an issue for graduating high school students, but general education development test (GED) completers, students that stop attending high school, and students that have been in the workforce for several years seeking retraining (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Vaughan 2006). Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) estimate one third of high school students are underserved, lack college preparation, are from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and are minorities, immigrants and first generation college students. Of these students that go to college, Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) assert they are more likely to attend community colleges and become enveloped in developmental coursework. Similarly, in comparing low-income students to middle- and upper-income students, Corrigan (2003) observes fewer than 20% of low-income students complete a "moderately rigorous" high school curriculum compared to 35% of middle- and upper-income students. Additionally, greater numbers of low-income students complete a GED program or alternative to a high school diploma, and even more delay the start of their postsecondary education (Corrigan, 2003).

"Of all postsecondary educational structures in America, the public community colleges bore the brunt of the poor preparation of students in the twentieth century" (Cohen and Brawer, 2006, p. 260). One of the major features of the community college—that of open access—helped community colleges welcome students needing remedial or developmental coursework. Clifford Adelman (2005), used data from four National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data sets to provide a comprehensive description of traditional-aged community college students' academic history. In this report published by the U.S. Department of Education, Adelman (2005) notes that approximately 60% of entering traditional-aged college students are required to take some form of remedial or developmental coursework to address under preparedness. With such a large percentage of students needing developmental coursework, studies examining the relationships and role of developmental education in persistence, retention and degree completion have gained notoriety within the last 10 years.

Studies by Hawley and Harris (2005), Fike and Fike (2008), and Silverman and Seidman (2001) all found that enrollment in developmental coursework predict student non-persistence. Hawley and Harris (2005) report the results of their institution's participation in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey. In exploring characteristics of first-year students at a metropolitan community college, Hawley and Harris (2005) found that the more developmental coursework a student has to complete, the less likely is the student to persist.

Analyzing factors contributing to student retention at community colleges, Fike and Fike (2008) determined that successful completion of developmental mathematics and developmental English courses are predictors of student retention. Receipt of federal financial aid, number of credit hours in which a student is enrolled, and participation in a student support services

program such as TRIO are also predictors of student retention and success in the Fike and Fike (2008) study.

Silverman and Seidman (2011) report their findings from a comparative study of student retention exploring whether the structure of a developmental mathematics course, upon successful completion, helps students persist to graduation. In their quasiexperimental study, Silverman and Seidman (2011) compared two different modes of instruction for a developmental mathematics course. In the control group, students were taught using traditional lecture techniques. In the treatment group, students were taught using self-paced, module-based instruction techniques. Silverman and Seidman (2011) discovered that with the module-based approach, students were more likely to progress to a college-level math course than students receiving the traditional lecture approach. They also found that the module-based instruction had positive effects on retention rates. However, there was not a significant difference in the cumulative college GPA between the control and treatment groups. The growing developmental education and persistence literature suggests that the completion of remedial coursework and changes to traditional pedagogical approaches increases persistence and retention rates of underprepared students.

Faculty Interaction and Involvement. Student interactions with faculty members represent the majority of contact students have with college personnel, highlighting the importance of student-faculty interaction in persistence and retention decisions. Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975) both identify faculty interaction and involvement as a form of student academic involvement, and both researchers highlight the importance of faculty interaction and involvement with respect to student success. Pascarella's and Terenzini's (1980) longitudinal study examined academic and social integration, including faculty interaction and involvement

as a test of Tinto's (1975) Student Departure Model. Specific to student-faculty interaction, they found that the more students were integrated and involved, the higher their likelihood of persistence. Later, Bers and Smith (1991) examined the concept of academic and social integration: part of their research incorporated 30 items developed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) relating to academic and intellectual development, peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty, faculty interest in students and teaching, and institutional and goal commitment. Bers and Smith (1991) found that academic and social integration are among the differences between students that persist and students that do not. Consistent with the Bers and Smith (1991) findings, Chang (2005) found that faculty engagement levels among community college students are low and faculty interactions are typically related to topics discussed in respective courses.

Student Support Services. Interaction and support from faculty is not the only social interaction and support students experience on campus. Tinto's (1975) research expresses the importance of social integration among factors contributing to student persistence. Included in Tinto's (1975) list of opportunities for social integration are "informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college" (p. 107). Tinto (1975) goes on to say that "Successful encounters in these areas result in various degrees of social communication, friendship support, faculty support, and college affiliation" (p. 107). Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) describe that students who are academically the most successful have a strong relationship with a member of the campus faculty, staff, or administration that helps them navigate their college experience.

Traditional Community College Students

Community colleges, as a direct result of their mission, serve traditional-aged students in two ways: (1) preparing them for a career and (2) preparing them to transfer to a four-year

institution (Karp, O'Gara & Hughes, 2008). Community colleges also attract students from low-income, minority, and academically unprepared backgrounds that have been traditionally underserved in American higher education (Choy, 2002; Townsend, Donaldson & Wilson, 2005). Students attend community college for a number of reasons and at a variety of points-in-time. This current study will examine persistence and retention among traditional-aged students.

Characteristics of Traditional Community College Students

Adelman (2005) provides a thorough description, or *portraits* of community college students. For students starting their postsecondary careers in a community college, Adelman (2005) summarizes: the traditional-aged first-year community college student is young; usually at an age less than 20, makes up approximately 40 percent of postsecondary students starting at a community college. Traditional-aged students starting their postsecondary education at a community college also have less academic momentum than those starting at four-year institutions; 55% of traditional-aged students need two or more remedial courses, are enrolled full-time and lives near campus (Adelman, 2005). The traditional first-year community college student probably works part-time, if employed at all. The student is expecting an education from their experience at a community college, but may be unsure of degree aspirations. The traditional community college student is also likely to transfer after 2 years to complete the requirements of a baccalaureate degree. Giving perspective to the of the number of traditional college students, Choy (2002) reported that traditional college students made up slightly more than one-fourth of undergraduates in the 1999-2000 academic years.

Traditional-Aged Students' Attendance and Completion Patterns. Adelman (2005) estimates approximately 60 percent of traditional-age undergraduate students attend more than one institution before graduating from college. The typical pathway for students attending

multiple institutions, according to McCormick's study (2003) is a one-way transfer to a 4-year institution after a student completes 2 years of coursework at a community college. Further, Adelman (2005) finds that nearly one-fourth of students starting their postsecondary education somewhere other than a community college have a "swirling" enrollment pattern, alternating their attendance between a community college and a 4-year institution. As a result, this shapes the need for community colleges to better serve this population of students.

Statement of the Problem

The existing community college student persistence and retention literature suggests that students do not always progress linearly toward degree completion. Consistent with this argument are findings from a recent National Student Clearinghouse publication. Developed in 1993, the National Student Clearinghouse is a nonprofit higher education data collection and processing organization that provides educational reporting, verification and research services to students, colleges and universities, administrators and other requestors (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). The National Student Clearinghouse collects data from 3,600 participating public and private colleges and universities whose enrollment accounts for 98% of all students in higher education (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Snapshot Report titled, *Contributions of Two-Year Institutions to Four-Year Completions* details several findings relating to the significance of community college enrollment in the U.S. higher education system:

- 46% of students who completed a degree at a four-year institution during the 2013-2014 academic years were enrolled for at least one class at a two-year institution during the previous 10 years.

- Of the 46% of students competing a degree with some community college experience, in 17% of these cases, two-year institution enrollment occurred in the last year of study before degree completion.

- Of the 46% of students competing a degree with some community college experience one-fifth of students were enrolled at a two-year institution for one term.

- Of the 46% of students completing a degree with some community college experience, nearly half were enrolled for five or more terms (2015).

The various National Student Clearinghouse Research Center publications available on their website report the rates of persistence, retention, and degree attainment and some of the basic descriptive statistics to describe trends in the data. The publications do not report any relationships between and among other variables.

While the majority of existing persistence and retention research focuses on factors that contribute to a student's decision to depart from their institution, or factors that put them at risk of departure through statistical analysis, the need to examine what encourages students to persist becomes more important. This alternative perspective of exploring what encourages students to stay represents two gaps in retention and persistence literature this study will address: a) the examination of persistence and retention from less of a deficit framework and more of an achievement framework; and b) the examination of the student's point of view.

Research Questions

1) What is the lived experience of traditional- aged community college students that encourage or discourage persistence?

2) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that are perceived as barriers while enrolled?

3) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students perceived as supports while enrolled?

Conclusion

This chapter first presented a brief history of community colleges. The chapter then highlighted the importance of the community college to the U.S. higher education system. Next, the chapter discussed the significance of the community college in reaching President Obama's college completion goals. Then the chapter provided an overview of persistence with particular attention to Tinto's student departure model, Astin's student involvement model and Bean's student attrition model. The final theme in this chapter included a discussion of factors that contribute to student departure: demographic characteristics, financial characteristics, academic support, student support, and off-campus support. The next chapter explores the methodology used in the current study to examine traditional-aged student experiences and perceptions that guide their decisions to enroll full-time and be retained.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand, explain, and interpret the meanings of traditional community college student experiences associated with persistence. Through the description of the participants lived experiences this study aimed to help community college faculty, staff, and administrators understand student perceptions with regard to how academic and non-academic factors affect student decisions to persist and continue their community college education. This study used a phenomenological approach described by Moustakas (1994) to describe perceptions and lived experiences through interviews and narrative accounts of traditional-aged community college students experiences of persistence and retention.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and procedures used to reveal traditional-aged community college student experiences with persistence. This chapter also provides a rationale for choosing the phenomenological research design to explore issues, with the goal of understanding more about what encourages or discourages traditional-aged community college students to continue their attendance from one semester and one year to the next. This chapter includes a restatement of the problem, research questions, a detailed description of the research design appropriateness and data collection procedures, confidentiality, data analysis procedures, strategies for trustworthiness, and the delimitations, limitations, and concerns associated with this study.

Restatement of the Problem

Retention and persistence literature concentrating on four-year college and university populations is abundant. Tinto (1975), Bean (1980), and Astin (1984) used four-year colleges

and universities as they developed and tested their models of student persistence. Researchers testing Tinto, Bean, and Astin's models have also used four-year colleges and universities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The fewer studies focusing on community college student populations seek a statistical link between some variable and student persistence and retention behaviors (Bers & Smith, 1991; Calcagno, et al., 2007; Feldman, 1993; Fike & Fike, 2008; Gates & Creamer, 1984; Ishitani, 2006). While these studies provide a big-picture perspective of what student persistence and retention behaviors are likely to be, they fail to provide the student's perceptions and experiences that contribute to their enrollment and departure decisions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this phenomenological study and helped develop an understanding of student experiences and perceptions that encourage or discourage persistence and retention:

1) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that encourage or discourage persistence?

2) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that are perceived as barriers to retention, persistence and graduation?

3) What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students perceived as supports while enrolled?

Research Design

Qualitative research is a method used as "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009, p.4). According to Hays and Singh (2012),

> Qualitative researchers approach the setting with an intention to become immersed and to rid themselves of an expert status. They are accepting and empathic toward individuals,

groups, and communities within that context. The listen to individual accounts of a phenomenon, engaging actively, and integrating new perspectives into their own ways of understanding participants, the context, phenomenon, or all three (p. 4).

The use of qualitative research in this study allowed the researcher to better understand traditional-aged community college student enrollment experiences, to promote participants' perceptions and experiences and to offer insight into bridging the gaps between research and practice. The bulk of existing literature describes and predicts persistence and retention patterns through a quantitative lens. This study, however, adds the student's voice about their perceptions and experiences related to their continued community college attendance. Ultimately, the study gives institutional faculty, staff and administrators the opportunity to understand how certain factors have encouraged or discouraged persistence among traditional-aged community college students.

This study will be guided by the social constructivist paradigm – that social interactions with the participants will help the researcher understand how the participants' truths associated with educational endeavors are defined by their perceptions and experiences. Through social constructivism, a part of an interpretative paradigm, "researchers seek to construct knowledge through social interactions as well as to understand how individuals construct knowledge" (Hays and Singh, 2012, p. 41).

Hays and Singh (2012) note qualitative researchers have a number of research traditions to choose from including case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, heuristic inquiry, ethnography, narratology and semiotics. The tradition of case study is inappropriate since the purpose of the research is not to document participant's life stories and events bound to a time and place, unlike phenomenology, which provides rich description of the essential elements of the experience (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012). The tradition of grounded theory is also

inappropriate, as my intention with this research is not to generate a theory or approach regarding participants' perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012). The tradition of narratology is inappropriate because narratology focuses on what the stories and experiences reveal about the individual. (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012).

Of these options, the characteristics and goals of phenomenology align best with this study's research questions. Moustakas (1994) offers that phenomenological studies are used "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (p. 13). Through analysis, the individual descriptions are examined for underlying themes. Then, commonalities among cases provide the general or universal meanings of the experience. Similarly, Hays and Sing (2012) identify phenomenology as a qualitative research approach used to investigate and reveal participants' lived experiences and perceptions with respect to some phenomenon.

Moustakas (1994) goes on to describe phenomenological research in general, specifically referencing the work of van Kaam (1959, 1966). Van Kaam (1966) operationalizes that qualitative researchers have the responsibility of ensuring that their participants experience "really feeling understood" (p. 12). In describing the phenomenon, Van Kaam (1966) states:

> The experience of 'really feeling understood' is a perceptual-emotional Gestalt: A subject, perceiving that a person co-experiences what things mean to the subject and accepts him, feels, initially, relief from experiential loneliness, and gradually, safe experiential communion with that person and with that which the subject perceives this person to represent (pp. 325-326, as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 12).

The phenomenological research process involves acknowledging and bracketing researcher assumptions, understanding the participants' real-world experiences, and then identifying commonalities in participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). Bracketing helps researchers set aside previous knowledge and refrain from judgment in order to

examine the essence of participants'' experiences and perceptions more objectively (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012). The process of understanding participants' real-world experiences and then identifying commonalities in the shared experiences involves collecting and analyzing data. Conducting interviews with participants adds the human element to the data and the ability for participants to explain their enrollment and persistence decisions, rather than being represented by a data point. The utilization of phenomenology as a research design allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of enrollment and persistence decisions from multiple participants' perspectives and experiences. Phenomenology is the most appropriate tradition for this study since the purpose is to unfold traditional-aged community college students' perspectives and lived experiences toward enrollment and persistence decisions. The outcome of this phenomenological study potentially contributes to, enhances, and strengthens current persistence and retention research relating to traditional-aged community college students.

Procedures

Population and Sampling

Population. The population for this study included traditional students currently enrolled in credit courses at a mid-size, public, multi-campus community college that serves seven counties and one city in the Southeastern United States. Traditional-aged college students are those between the ages of 18 and 24 and proceed to attend college directly after high school graduation (Cohen & Brawer, 2006). After working with the researched institution's Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness to identify a representative sample of potential participants, I invited students who are traditional-aged and are enrolled for the first time in college (FTIC) at the researched institution to participate in the study. The researched community college serves more than 9,500 credit students, and more than 12,150 students

enrolled in noncredit courses. Approximately 66% of the enrolled students are under the age of

25. Table 1 compares key characteristics of the traditional aged students enrolled at this college

and a comparable national profile (AACC. 2014).

Table 1.

Comparison of College Composition

Population	Researched Institution	National
Full-time students	28%	38%
Part-time students	72%	62%
Average age	23	28
Under age 21	66%	37%
Between 22 – 39	17%	49%
Over age 40	8%	14%
Gender		
Male	38%	43%
Female	62%	57%

Source. NCES, 2014; AACC 2016.

Sampling. After receiving permission from the Darden College of Education Human

Subjects Review Committee, I requested permission from administrators at the researched

institution through the institution's review board procedures to access and interview students.

Participants were selected by means of purposeful, criterion-based sampling while also trying to

ensure a representative demographic sample. Purposeful and criterion-based sampling, according

to Hays and Singh (2012), involves sampling and selecting participants who have experienced a

particular phenomenon to yield thick, rich descriptions. Four major criteria for selection in this

study will include that the participants: 1) enrolled for the first time at the institution in the 2014-2015 academic year; 2) have continued their attendance in at least one course the following academic year; 3) are between the ages of 18 – 24; and 4) will be first-time-in-college (FTIC) students who have not participated in dual-enrollment programs, or have not received transfer credits from other colleges or universities. I contacted the student services offices located at the researched institution for assistance in identifying and inviting prospective participants to participate in the study. Eligible participants were required to have been enrolled as a student at the institution for at least one semester out of the complete year, and to remain enrolled (full- or part-time) until the time of the interview (see Appendix B).

For this study, I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with student participants. Creswell (2009) suggests that for phenomenological research, the sample should be small, five to 25, in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of participant experiences. I planned to continue interviews until reaching saturation, or the point at which no new data emerges (Creswell, 2008; Hays and Singh, 2012). The goal was to have a minimum of 15 students to participate in the study, and to help reach saturation.

Once a group of 294 eligible participants were identified by student services personnel at the researched institution, I contacted the students directly by email informing them they are eligible to participate in the study and provide the prospective participants with a brief description of the study, information identifying how their confidentiality will be maintained, and their role and rights as participants (See Appendix B). I offered all participants college related memorabilia from the college's bookstore for participating. One large prize (a college sweatshirt) was offered through a random drawing.

Once the students agreed to participate, and as part of the interview process, I requested participants to complete a brief questionnaire that took no more than 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire included basic demographic data, including age, gender, ethnicity, area of residence, and academic intent from each participant to describe the population sample and to ensure that participants meet the eligibility requirements for the study. I requested participants to read, sign, and submit consent forms verifying participants are 18 years or older, but younger than 24 at the time of enrollment, describing my intention to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation, and are aware of any potential risks associated with participating in the study. Steps to protect participant confidentiality included assigning pseudonyms, password-protecting interview transcripts and excluding any personally identifying information from manuscripts or published materials associated with the study.

Data Collection

Prior to collecting and analyzing data, necessary permissions were obtained from the Human Subjects Committee of the Darden College of Education at Old Dominion University (ODU) and the researched institution.

Fifteen individuals were interviewed following an interview protocol to help achieve saturation (see Appendix D). Interviewing study participants is an appropriate method of collecting data in phenomenological research while also following the social constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012). Interviewing is chosen as the primary method of data collection in this study for a couple of reasons. First, interviews are widely used method of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012). Second, interviews are a form of "complex narratives that look at what happened and the interviewee's

reflection and interpretation of those experiences" (Hays and Singh, 2012, p. 238). As such, the interviews aided in providing an understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences.

Interviews were scheduled at a time and location convenient to the interviewee, free from distractions and interruptions. Once the interview was scheduled with a participant I provided an informed consent agreement that includes a summary of the study, the purpose and procedures of the research, the risks and benefits of the study, and the participant's right to stop the interview at any point in time, the steps taken to protect confidentiality, and the interviewer's contact information to review and sign. During the interview, I provided participants with a written list of the interview questions, and potential probing, follow-up questions so they may follow along and read through the questions.

Each interview began with a review of the informed consent form and permission to audio-record the interview. Participants were provided a written copy of the interview questions and potential probing, follow-up questions during the interview. Once acceptance of informed consent and permission to audio-record was obtained, the conversation started with opening questions designed to familiarize participants with types of questions to expect in the interview. I conducted interviews in a semi-structured manner using an interview protocol, or loosely designed script (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012). The interview protocol contained opening introductory information, a review of information in the consent and release form, and a listing of the interview questions. I asked each participant to reflect on thirteen questions:

IQ 1: Tell me about your decision to attend community college, what led you here?

IQ 2: What were some of the things you considered in your decision?

IQ 3: Tell me about your decision to continue attending. What is keeping you here?

IQ 4: What was your first semester/first year like?

IQ 5: Tell me about your experience with continuing your attendance, what is keeping

you here?

IQ 6: What has been your most heartbreaking setback so far?

IQ 7: What has been the scariest or most frustrating experience?

IQ 8: Have you thought about stopping your attendance, or quitting your college journey?

IQ 9: What is your support system like?

IQ 10: What are your interactions like with professors, classmates, and other college

employees?

IQ 11: What is your most memorable college experience?

IQ 12: What has been the most rewarding part of your journey?

IQ 13: What helps you continue at the community college?

I also asked any necessary probing, follow-up questions. Hays and Singh (2012) suggest

the use of probing questions in interviews to encourage participants to elaborate more in their

responses. In order capture the perspective of the participants' experience and perceptions,

follow-up questions I used include: Tell me a little more about that experience. What made it

helpful/difficult? Is there anything that has not been covered that you would like to share? Each

interview lasted 30-60 minutes (Hays and Singh, 2012).

During each interview I took field notes pertaining to that interview with the intent of

capturing information about the interview environment and points of interest normally absent in

an audio transcript. Field notes collected in this study helped describe and reflect on each

interview experience. The field notes also served as a supplement to the audio-recorded

interview transcript and include my observations about the interviewee, the physical setting, and

myself as the interviewer (Hays and Singh, 2012).

Shortly after each data collection, I completed what Hays and Singh (2012) describe as an interview summary sheet to collect notes, summarize the experience, and identify issues and themes gleaned in the interview experience. My summary sheet included observational notes denoting what happened, my reflexive notes, my initial thoughts on themes and codes, and overall feelings about the interview. In addition to the audio recording and the interview summary sheet, directly after each interview, I transcribed the audio recording verbatim using word processing software.

Throughout the interview process, I used a reflexive journal to facilitate bracketing, or the process of examining and setting aside any personal beliefs, assumptions and values associated with community college student retention and persistence (Creswell, 2009; Hays and Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). I used the reflexive journal to bracket my personal beliefs and biases associated with information learned through exploring the retention and persistence literature. I also record notes regularly through the process in a reflexive journal.

Data Analysis

To begin analysis of the interviews, first, I used bracketing to acknowledge personal biases and assumptions in a reflective journal. Next, I followed Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Van Kaam (1959, 1966) method of phenomenological data analysis. Moustakas's (1994) approach involves seven major steps including: (a) listing and preliminary grouping, termed horizonalizing and clustering, (b) reduction and elimination, (c) clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, (d) final identification of the invariant constituents and themes, (e) construction of individual textural description, (f) construction of individual structural description from the individual textual description, and (g) construction of a textural-structural description for each participant (p. 120-121).

The first step in Moustakas's (1994) approach was horizonalizing, and clustering resulting horizons into themes. Horizonalizing, according to Moustakas (1994) involves initially treating each statement equally, and then identifying the "nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements in the participants' transcripts" (Hays and Singh, 2012, p. 355).

The next step involved reduction and elimination. In this step, each statement was tested for two requirements. As described by Moustakas (1994) the first asks, does the statement "contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it" (p. 121). The second requirement asks "is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. Expressions not meeting the above requirements were eliminated. Overlapping repetitive and vague expressions were also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remained were the invariant constituents of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents was the third step in the Moustakas (1994) phenomenological data analysis process. In this step of analysis, clusters were created and key themes were labeled. Related to this step, the fourth step in the analysis process involved checking "the invariant constituents and their accompanying themes against the complete record of the research participant" (Moustakas, 1994 p. 121). The fourth step also involved asking three at least three questions of the invariant constituents: "(a) Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcription? (b) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?" and (c) if the invariant constituents and themes are not explicit or compatible, then "they are not relevant to the co-researcher's experience and should be deleted" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

The fifth step in the Moustakas (1994) data analysis process, which relies on the previous steps, involved the construction of a textural description of the experience based on "verbatim examples from the transcribed interview" (p. 121).

Step six in the Moustakas (1994) data analysis process involved constructing individual structural descriptions of individual participants' experiences based on the textural description. And then, building on step six, the seventh step was to construct individual textural-structural descriptions of individual participants' experiences, revealing the "meanings and essences of the experience" and "incorporating the invariant constituents and themes" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The data analysis culminated in a composite, thick, rich description of each participant's perceptions and experiences enrolling and being retained as traditional-aged community college students. This description included verbatim examples of the participants' varied experiences and the barriers and supports they have faced as traditional-aged community college students.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

I employed several methods to maximize the trustworthiness of this study including: a reflexive journal, detailed field notes, member checking, thick descriptions, simultaneous data collection, an audit trail, and peer review and consensus coding. Each of these strategies were used to demonstrate the credibility, transferability, confirmability, dependability and the authenticity of the study.

Reflexive Journal and Field Notes

A reflexive journal, according to Creswell (2009), Hays and Singh (2012), and Moustakas (1994) is an effective tool to use to reduce researcher bias. I wrote regular entries throughout the study. Additionally, I used the reflexive journal to bracket biases, assumptions,

and previous experiences as a means to limit researcher bias. As equally as important, I used the reflexive journal to document how the research process is affecting my point of view.

While interviews were captured through audio recordings and transcribed verbatim, the collection of field notes was helpful in understanding the students' perceived experiences. Field notes were kept and maintained for each participant's interview and included my observations about the interviewee, the physical setting, and myself as the interviewer. During each interview, my field notes captured information about the interview environment, relevant elements of the participants' non-verbal displays, and points of interest that were normally captured in an audio transcript. The field notes were used to help describe, reflect, and supplement each of the audio-recorded interviews. The use of field notes in qualitative research, according to Hays and Singh (2012) aid in demonstrating the confirmability and authenticity of a study.

Member Checking

To address concerns with the accuracy and credibility of the interview transcripts, member checking was used to solicit feedback from participants. Member checking, according to Hays and Singh (2012), involves participants in the research process, and is an essential component in qualitative research. In this study, member checking involved three major steps: (a) participants were asked to review their corresponding interview transcripts for accuracy; (b) participants were asked to confirm that the interview transcript authentically represents their intended meanings; (c) participants were given the opportunity to review the final report for any additional input. In addition, member checking allowed me to thank the participants for their time and support of this study. Member checking supports the confirmability, credibility, and authenticity elements of trustworthiness in this study (Hays and Singh, 2012).

Thick Descriptions

I employed thick, rich description to ensure a sufficient level of detail about the

participants' perceptions and experiences enrolling full-time are included so others may be able

to draw the same or similar conclusions. Thick description in this study, involved the use of rich,

descriptive language in data interpretation to help convey inferences beyond the basic details of

the study. Thick description also supported the credibility, transferability, confirmability, and

authenticity of the study. Hays and Singh (2012) identify that thick description can also be used

as part of an audit trail and as "a way of thinking about data interpretation and reporting (p. 212).

Simultaneous Data Collection and Analysis

Hays and Singh (2012) highlight the importance of simultaneously collecting and

analyzing data as a strategy for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research. To facilitate

simultaneous data collection and analysis, interviews were transcribed directly after each

interview, allowing me the opportunity to begin coding and seek clarification through member

checking. Simultaneous data collection and analysis supports the credibility, confirmability, and

authenticity of the study.

Audit Trail

An audit trail is an imperative component of qualitative studies. An audit trail "provides

physical evidence of systematic data collection and analysis procedures" (Hays & Singh, 2012,

p. 214). The audit trail in this study enhances the integrity of the research process. Specifically,

the audit trail for this study included a timeline of the research activities, participant contact

information, informed consent forms, demographic information, the interview protocol, field

notes, reflexive journal entries, data summary sheets, interview transcriptions, interview

recordings, and notes from peer review meetings. The audit trail supports the dependability and

transferability elements of trustworthiness in this study.

Peer Review and Consensus Coding

The consultation of peers in the research process will be used as a strategy to maximize

confirmability in this study. ODU faculty members, specifically the chair of the dissertation

committee and the methodologist will be asked to review and provide feedback of the study

throughout the research process. In addition peers at the researched institution familiar with the

literature and the phenomenological research approach were consulted to provide feedback

throughout the process. Hays and Singh (2012) suggest the use of peer debriefing to provide both

support and challenge to the researcher's efforts.

A peer at the researched institution, who had also completed a graduate level research

methods course, agreed to serve as a second coder for this study. I met with the colleague serving

as the second coder for about an hour after the interviews were completed and transcribed to

discuss the research project. The transcription and coding process was discussed in detail. In this

meeting with the research peer, I did not share or discuss any ideas I had identified during the

transcription process. During the meeting, the second coder was trained by the researcher to code

interview transcripts following Moustakas's (1994) modification of van Kaam's

phenomenological data analysis. The research per was provided with a full set of interview

transcripts, the original interview questions, and Moustakas's modification as it appeared in his

1994 text. The goal of the meeting was to prepare the colleague to be a second coder so they

could examine the data on their own time, and confidently identify emergent themes. After the

peer reviewer completed the coding process, we met to discuss the emergent themes in the study.

The second coder and I came to consensus on each of the primary and sub-themes. Once the

primary and sub-themes were finalized, evidence for each category from every interview transcript was identified.

Delimitations, Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Delimitations

There were some delimitations associated with this study. First, perspectives and perceptions of community college faculty, staff, and administrators were not included in this study. This study was aimed at identifying the students' experiences that attract them to or discourage them from attending a community college. Second, this study did not involve the use of quantitative research methods beyond the collection of basic demographic data of participants to describe the sample. Such an approach for this study's research design was unnecessary, as the researcher was not looking for the affect, causes or relationships as a part of the study.

Further, this study did not utilize other qualitative traditions, as they were inappropriate for seeking students' perceptions and experiences related to full-time attendance. Some of the tradeoffs in choosing the phenomenological research design over grounded theory and narratology included not focusing on generating a theory for any phenomena revealed as a result of the study, and the inability to develop a consensus or draw concrete conclusions as to applicability to any phenomena discovered (Hays and Singh, 2012).

Limitations

Potential limitations to the methodology included the nature of the participants, the use of interviews as a main source of data, the amount of time involved conducting the study, and the researcher's previous experience in working with individuals in the community college setting. The nature of the participants is a potential limitation because their personal characteristics, background and experiences, may vary greatly despite falling within the same age group. Every

effort will be made to ensure a variety of participants were included to ensure the essence of perceptions and experiences with their choice to attend full-time are reflective of others that have similar characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences.

A limitation associated with using interviews is associated with the difficulty of conveying the actual interview experience through an interview transcript. While the language and verbalized reactions were captured and represented in the interview transcripts, the non-verbal reactions and body language cannot be conveyed in an interview transcript. To address this issue, participants were asked to member check and were provided the opportunity to expand on what they meant when using certain phrases and statements that appeared unclear in the transcript. In addition to member checking, field notes and reflective journals during the data collection process helped me in describing the essence of the interview.

According to Moustakas (1994), "In a phenomenological investigation the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon" (p. 59). I do have a personal interest in this study. It is important to mention my own previous experience as a full-time, traditional-aged community college student and my community college employment experience. I currently serve as an Associate Instructor of Communication Studies and Theatre at a community college, and have previously served the same institution as a student services employee in the Admissions and Records and Financial Aid offices. In effort to be factual and objective and to address this limitation, I was sure to sequester any personal biases such as personal experiences as a full-time, traditional-aged community college student, personal experiences from previous and current positions held as a community college employee in my reflexive journal. In addition, students selected for participation in the study did not include anyone who had previously or was currently enrolled in one of my courses.

Documenting my personal beliefs and assumptions and setting them aside through bracketing will help to avoid influence on the study, minimize researcher bias, and help me fully understand the participants' points of view.

Another limitation relates to participation in this study and is associated with design issues. This study was designed to investigate only traditional-aged, first-time-in-college, students perceptions and experiences associated with enrolling and being retained at a community college. This meant that other populations of students, specifically: traditional-aged and non-traditional aged students with dual-enrollment or other college experience were excluded from the study. Further, the researched institution is part of a statewide community college system. Involving only one of the state's community colleges in the study limited participation and the perspectives and experiences of students to only those attending that institution.

Although there are delimitations and limitations, they did not compromise the effectiveness of the study because of the steps taken to maximize trustworthiness and the attempt at rigorous qualitative research.

Ethical Considerations

An ethical concern associated with developing and conducting phenomenological research involves accounting for the researcher's bias (Hays & Singh, 2012). To account for researcher bias, I bracketed before data collection and analyzed any expectations, assumptions or biases to help keep them separate from the data in a reflexive journal. Another concern spans both ethical and legal considerations in this study: the participants. Ethical and legal concerns associated with participants in the study included protecting participants and causing the least amount of harm possible, protecting their identity, maintaining their confidentiality, and the

potential of harmful information being discussed in the interviews (Creswell, 2010). The participants involved in the study were members of the researched institution's student body and it was imperative to maintain positive working relationships with each of them. Therefore, it was important to protect participants' confidentiality and identity throughout the research process and make the effort to maintain a positive image. In order to protect and maintain confidentiality in this study, I will assigned pseudonyms to refer to the participants' responses, kept any collected data in a password-protected, encrypted computer file, and kept the computer in locked storage when not in use. I will also destroy all data associated with this study within six years of concluding research.

A third concern involves the multiple hats I wear in this research process in terms of my position in higher education and as a researcher. I have been upfront about my experience in higher education. My role as an instructor involves teaching the subject matter, facilitating the learning process for my students, and contributing to student engagement activities. My employment background has allowed me to relate to students and helped me to develop and incorporate strategies to engage students inside and outside the classroom environment. Personal biases will be inevitable, however I will make a conscious effort to bracket the biases and document how the research is affecting me in a reflexive journal maintained throughout the study.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 discusses the research design and methodology. Specifically, the study uses phenomenological data collection and analysis to explore traditional-aged students' perceptions and experiences of attending a community college is conducted primarily at the interest of the researcher. Potential stakeholders in the outcomes of this research include community college

administrators involved in enrollment management and retention. By listening directly and reflexively to the participants, this study will provide new data and information valuable to college administrators, enrollment management, and student services professionals highlighting factors that contribute to students' decisions to enroll and be retained at a community college. Chapter 4 will include a report of the results, and Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings, implications, conclusions from the study, and directions for future research.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The study reported here examined in detail the perceptions and experiences of traditional-aged community college students and the contributions of those perceptions and experiences to persistence. This chapter is organized by themes, and then reports the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students; finally I provide conclusions drawn from the lived student experiences. In the process, I examine the experiences that are perceived as barriers and the experiences perceived as supports.

Participant Demographics

Fifteen participants were involved in this qualitative research study. Table 2 visually represents participants' basic demographic data at the time of the interview. Included in the table are the participants' starting semester, the number of credits they were enrolled in at the time of the interview, whether they were receiving financial aid, and the type of award (none, grants only, grants and loans, loans only, or other forms of financial aid). As indicated in Table 2, four participants were males and ten were females, two participants began their attendance during the summer 2014 semester, and the remaining thirteen participants began their attendance in the fall 2014 semester. At the time of the interview, eleven participants were enrolled at a full-time student level (at least 12 credit hours), one participant was enrolled at a three-quarter-time level (9 credits), and three participants were enrolled as half-time (6 credits) students. All participants were between the ages of 18-24 at the time of initial enrollment. In addition, eight participants were not receiving financial aid, five participants were receiving grants only as part of their financial aid award, one student was receiving a combination of grants and loans, and one

student was receiving a combination of loans and scholarships. With the exception of enrollment

level (full-time or part-time), the participants' demographic information aligns closely with the

Table 2.

Participants' Demographic Data

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	First Semester	Enrollment Level (credits)	Financial Aid
P01	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	6	No
P02	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	13	No
P03	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	12	No
P04	21	Male	White	Fall 2014	9	Grants only
P05	20	Male	White	Fall 2014	15	No
P06	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	15	Loans only
P07	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	18	No
P08	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	14	Loans and scholarships
P09	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	13	Grants only
P10	24	Male	Black	Fall 2014	6	No
P11	19	Male	Hispanic	Fall 2014	12	Grants only
P12	23	Female	White	Summer 2014	6	No
P13	25	Female	White	Spring 2014	12	Grants only
P14	19	Female	White	Fall 2014	16	No
P15	20	Male	Black	Fall 2014	15	Grants only

researched institution's population. Table 3 visually represents the comparison of participants' demographic informaiton with the researched institution's demographic information.

Table 3.

Comparison of Demographic Information

Population	Participants	Researched Institution
Average Age	20	23
Enrollment Level		
Full-time	73%	28%
Part-time	26%	72%
Gender		
Male	33%	39%
Female	66%	61%
Ethnicity		
African American	13%	4%
Hispanic	6%	8%
White	86%	73%

Source. NCES, 2016.

Participant Interviews

Face-to-face interviews were completed over the course of four months. The interviews took place in a neutral location, a private meeting area adjacent to a faculty office suite at a time convenient to the participants. Each interview began with a script (Appendix D). Each interview was recorded and lasted no longer than one hour. Collection of data depended on participant availability. Interviews were completed by March 2016.

By November 2015, potential participants meeting the criteria for the study: traditional aged (ages 18-24), first time in college (with no dual enrollment or transfer credits), began attending in 2014 and continued attending until time of the interview, were identified with the assistance of the study site's Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness personnel. There were 294 students attending the study site that were identified as potential participants. With the assistance of the Dean of Students, each of the potential participants were emailed an invitation to participate in this dissertation project (Appendix B).

The initial email garnered 8 responses from potential participants. A second email to the same list of potential participants sent a month later garnered an additional 7 responses. Interviews with respondents were scheduled at a time convenient for the participant. While meeting each participant for the first time, entrée was achieved by giving participants a brief introduction and time to ask questions before the scripted interview and recording began (Appendix D). For eleven of the fifteen participants this period of introduction lasted between 3 and 5 minutes. For one participant, P10, this introduction time lasted approximately 10 minutes. During the neutral time for participant 10, the participant and his conversation partner explained his disability and that they would be using a letter board to communicate as the participant is autistic with limited verbal communication.

The phenomenological research approach used in this study allows for the interview process, according to Hays and Singh (2012), to "discover and describe the meaning or essence of the participants lived experience or knowledge as it appears to the consciousness" (p. 50). To handle the large amounts of data collected during the interviews, an organized and systematic approach to data collection and analysis was essential.

Participant Descriptions

In this section, participant descriptions are provided based on interactions throughout the interviews and information gained in the opening minutes before the interview recordings began.

Participant 1. Participant 1 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 19 year-old female. The participant is a part-time student who does not receive any financial aid. This participant is still very dependent on her parents and grandparents, and all but specifically states that she is not ready to live on her own. She has strong family support and wants to stay close to home. The participant has a lot of responsibilities at home, displays lower confidence levels, like lower amounts of eye contact, and timidity. The participant is moving slowly through her community college experience, taking 1 or 2 classes each semester. Overall, her interview responses indicate she is generally satisfied with her community college experience. She chose the community college because of the class sizes, closeness to home, and that she's not sure what she wants to do.

Participant 2. Participant 2 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 19-year-old female. The participant is a full-time student, and does not receive any financial aid. The participant began her attendance at the researched institution during the fall 2014 semester. The participant is a dependent student, living at home with her mother and two siblings while her father is deployed overseas. This participant is moving aggressively toward degree completion, with plans to transfer to a four-year institution. Overall, the participant has had a positive experience with faculty and staff at the community college, and believes "everyone should go to community college."

Participant 3. Participant 3 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 19 year-old female. She has two older brothers who have attended the same community college, and also have experience

attending a four-year institution. The participant is a full-time student who does not receive any federal financial aid, and began attendance in the fall 2014 semester. The participant is planning to transfer to a four-year institution once she completes her program at the community college. She has a strong, outgoing personality that is evident during the opening minutes of the interview.

Participant 4. Participant 4 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 21 year-old male. He began his community college attendance in the fall 2014 semester, and is enrolled as a three-quarter-time student (9 credit hours), and receives only grants as part of his federal financial aid award. In the interview, the participant identifies that he is a first-generation college student and has been involved with student activities on campus.

Participant 5. Participant 5 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 20 year-old male. He began his attendance in the fall 2014 semester and is enrolled as a full-time student. He does not receive any federal financial aid. Interactions during this interview led me to believe this participant has more of an introverted personality and prefers to keep to himself rather than having a large social network. However, the participant was friendly and open during the interview. The participant plans to transfer to an in state, large public research university located in a metropolitan area after completing his studies at the researched institution.

Participant 6. Participant 6 identifies as a White/Caucasian 19 year-old female. She began her attendance in the fall 2014 semester and is enrolled as a full-time student. She receives only loans as part of her federal financial aid award. She was candid and well spoken during her interview and highlighted her experience as an online student.

Participant 7. Participant 7 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 19 year-old female. She began her attendance in the fall 2014 semester and is enrolled as a full-time student. She does not

receive any federal financial aid. The participant lives in a predominantly rural part of the researched institution's service area. During the preliminary elements of the interview it was obvious that this participant is shy, reserved and may not be as open about her experiences. She was straightforward with her responses and offered very few details without further questioning.

Participant 8. Participant 8 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 19 year-old female. She began her attendance in the fall 2014 semester and is enrolled as a full-time student. Her financial aid award consists of loans and scholarships. This participant lives in a rural part of the community college's service region. In addition, the participant was a homeschool student throughout high school and lives at home with her parents and siblings. The participant is active in clubs and activities on-campus and volunteers within her community. Participant 8 was open, straightforward, and friendly during the interview.

Participant 9. Participant 9 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 19 year-old female. She began her community college attendance in the fall 2014 semester and is enrolled as a full-time student. Her financial aid award consists only of grants. The participant attends the community college primarily in the evening because she works full-time during the day. This participant was polite, friendly, and straightforward in the interview. She speaks openly about her experiences at the community college and her decisions to continue attending.

Participant 10. Participant 10 identifies as a Black/African American, 24 year-old male. He began his community college attendance in the fall 2014 semester and is enrolled half-time (6 credits). He does not receive a federal financial aid award. In setting up the interview, the participant advised he works with an advocate, or conversation partner to communicate, explaining he has difficulty with verbal responses and uses a letterboard to 'talk'. He also requested a copy of the interview questions the evening before the interview was to take place so

he could write out responses to the questions, and with the help of the conversation partner and the letterboard continue the conversation during the interview.

The day of the interview, I met with both the participant and his conversation partner. During the first 10 minutes of the interview, the conversation partner explained the participant is autistic with limited verbal communication abilities. The conversation partner then explained that the participant primarily communicates with a letterboard. The letterboard was about the size of a standard clipboard, but contained stencils of each letter of the alphabet and a period. For each question Participant 10 had typed out a start to his response, and then with the use of the communication partner and the letterboard finished his response. During the interview, the communication partner held the letterboard and the participant pointed to each letter to form words and sentences to communicate. The communication partner then 'translated' the letter combinations into words and sentences. If there was an error, the participant would stop his communication partner and start over. Despite the limited verbal communication, the participant was candid with his experiences as a community college student and friendly during the interview. The communication partner worked diligently during the interview and translated only what the participant was saying, or had typed.

Participant 11. Participant 11 identifies as a Hispanic, 19 year-old male. He began his community college attendance in 2014 and is enrolled full-time. His federal financial aid award consists of grants only. He lives at home with his family. This participant was friendly and candid during the interview.

Participant 12. Participant 12 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 23 year-old female. She began her community college attendance in the summer 2014 semester. She is enrolled half-time (6 credits) and she does not receive a federal financial aid award. This participant was

homeschooled and graduated high school at the age of 16. During the interview, the participant was candid, yet straightforward with her responses. Her overall demeanor was approachable and friendly.

Participant 13. Participant 13 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 25 year-old female (turning 25 just a few days before the interview). She began her community college attendance in the spring 2014 semester. She attends full-time and receives only grants as part of her federal financial aid award. This participant was very open and candid during the interview. In the opening minutes of our time together, the participant explained that she started to attend an online-only college, but never completed any classes and ended up withdrawing from the institution prior to the end of her first group of classes. She also shared that her experience at the online-only school helped her figure out what she was looking for and the type of support she would need to be successful. She was friendly and has a bubbly personality throughout the interview.

Participant 14. Participant 14 identifies as a White/Caucasian, 19 year-old female. She began her community college attendance in the fall 2014 semester. She attends full-time and does not receive a federal financial aid award. The participant was quiet and reserved, but friendly during the interview.

Participant 15. Participant 15 identifies as a Black/African American, 20 year-old male. He began his community college attendance in the fall 2014 semester. He attends full-time and receives only grants as part of his federal financial aid award. This participant has a very dynamic personality. In the first few minutes of meeting him, the participant shared his hobbies included dancing. During the interview he was open and forthright with his responses. He also displayed a high level of respect and was friendly.

Emerging Themes Among Participant Interviews

Participant interview responses were coded following Moustakas's (1994) six-step approach, and then organized with respect to the research questions. Out of this, narratives for each emergent theme were developed. This section highlights the emergent themes and interconnectedness among the fifteen participant's interviews. Table 4 visually represents the seven prominent themes from the interviews and connects each of them to the research questions. The seven emergent themes from the interviews were at least mentioned in nearly all the interviews, although some participants went into greater detail.

The seven themes, identified in Table 4, included: 1) financial characteristics, (with three sub-themes of concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled); 2) early anxious thoughts; 3) being undecided; 4) family support; 5) determination and self-motivation; 6) on-campus engagement and interaction (with four sub-themes of course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions); 7) plans to transfer. Each prominent theme was associated with RQ1, experiences that encourage or discourage persistence. Some themes were associated with a second research question, while other themes were associated with all three research questions. Each theme is explained below, and then evidence from the interviews is used to support the theme, and finally within each theme, there are conclusions about how the interview data is related to the theme.

Theme 1: Financial Characteristics

The theme of financial characteristics encompasses issues associated with student finances. There were three main sub-themes prevalent in the interview data that fall under the heading of financial characteristics: concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled. Concern about cost is the student's consciousness of the cost of higher education.

Table 4.

Prominent Themes Connected to Research Questions

Theme	Encourage or discourage persistence	Perceived as barriers	Perceived as supports
Financial Characteristics			
Concern about cost	X	X	
Financial aid	X		X
Working while enrolled	X	X	
Early anxious thoughts	X	X	
Undecided	X	X	
Family support	X		X
Determination and self-motivation	X		X
On-campus engagement and interactions			
Course experiences	X	X	X
Professor interactions	X	X	X
Counseling and advising experiences	X	X	X
College staff interactions	X	X	X
Plans to transfer	X		X

The sub-theme of financial aid represents the shared student experiences receiving or not receiving financial aid. As a third sub-theme, working while enrolled encompasses what students report as their responsibilities to help manage their personal experiences while enrolled.

Concern about Cost. The concern about cost was a sub-theme reflected throughout the interviews, and falls under a broader theme of financial characteristics. Participant 1 shares, "it was less expensive than attending a four-year institution several hours away." Participant 2 explains, "I want to be able to still work and go to classes and make money." She goes on to say, "So when I do live on my own, you know, at a normal college, I'll be able to, you know, not have to come home and work my butt off and be poor and broke." For Participant 4 working "just helps with all the bills that I have for everything else." He goes on to say, "I work two full-time jobs at a restaurant and in construction." Participant 6 decided to attend the community college for "mostly financial reasons." Later she explains that despite thinking about transferring to a couple different universities, "every time I've come back to the fact that it is so inexpensive for the quality of education you are getting here that it's definitely worth it just to stay here." For Participant 7, she says, "I was at first going to go to a private college, and I couldn't afford it, and so I decided I wanted to stay local too, to reduce the cost." Participant 8 decided to attend the community college rather than going to a university and avoid having " to spend like thousands and thousands of dollars doing my first year" and "a waste of money so community college give me time to decide, and also saves finances." She goes on to say she thought about "how much it was going to cost my parents, and how much it would cost me later in life" and "if community college was going to be worth the gas money " to travel from home to campus.

Participant 9 says, "there's always that financial benefit of going to a community college for two years as opposed to jump starting into a 4-year institution" She continues explaining that

attending the community college would help her save money on "tuition and books, and fees and things like that." She goes on to share about her financial difficulty the second year after her one-time scholarship funds were exhausted. Among Participant 9's concerns are "the amount I've had to pay in my second year, as opposed to my first year," and "being nervous of not being able to come up with the funds for textbooks and how that will affect me in a class situation."

Participant 11 says, "One of the things that has been holding me back has been financial status. Being able to come up with money." Participant 13 shares, "I considered where I wanted to go and what was going to be the most cost effective way to get there." Later she adds, "My husband took on more work so I could back to school." Participant 14 expresses that attending a community college is "a lot cheaper and more affordable." Participant 15 explains that money was one of the first things he considered in his decision to attend the community college, and decided "It was the best financial choice."

The concern about cost is an emergent sub-theme highlighting traditional-aged students' consciousness about the cost of postsecondary education. For some participants, the concern about cost is reflected in their decisions to attend the community college, with the goal of saving money. The concern about cost is also attributed to reasons why participants intend to continue at the community college instead of transferring early to a four-year institution.

Financial Aid. The common theme of financial aid is reflected in the interviews and falls under the primary theme of financial characteristics. Responses to the questionnaire distributed at the beginning of each interview indicate seven participants receive some form of financial aid. Five indicated they receive only grants, one reported receiving only student loans, and one reported receiving student loans and scholarships. The remaining eight participants reported in the questionnaire they do not receive financial aid. However, in the interviews, one participant

shared they do not receive federal financial aid, but has received other forms of financial support. The sub-theme of financial aid includes participant descriptions of their experiences receiving or needing financial assistance.

Participant 3 maintains a full-time class schedule to continue receiving "grants through [my dad's] work." Participant 9 received scholarships her first year of college and then her federal financial aid award the second year was reduced. She shares, "My first year here was completely all paid. I actually ended up getting money back, about $2,400 after tuition was paid and books and everything because of the amount of scholarships I was given my first year." She goes on, "But when I got into my second year, I didn't have some of those scholarships – they were one time scholarships from high school and my financial aid had dropped down because I was working so much." She continues to share her frustration, "And I guess that it's not really taken into account when they give you, or when the government gives you your financial aid packet" that money from working helps to support herself, rather than paying tuition. The decrease in financial aid made her "nervous of not being able to come up with the funds for textbooks and how that will affect me in a class situation."

Participant 6 explains the challenge she faces with financial aid, "My dad makes enough money for me to be able to pay for college" so "I do get loans but I don't get grants very much at all." Her father, she says, "Is not paying for college" which makes it "difficult to pay for college by myself or having to take out these huge loans." Participant 12 shares that "financial aid was difficult" because she doesn't "meet the requirements for federal financial aid," but she's working on applying for scholarships to help with some of the expenses.

Participant 4 attributes receiving financial aid to helping him continue, "What's really helped me with staying in a community college is being able to do to the (pauses) financial aid"

because of all the "bills I have for everything else." Participant 11 is financially responsible for

school costs, he shares" I'm basically on my own. I get help from financial aid but if I need to

make any payments I have to come up with the money." Participant 13 acknowledges,

"Definitely the financial aid helps" her continue at the community college.

The receipt or necessity of financial aid is a second sub-theme associated with financial

characteristics. For a couple of participants the receipt of financial aid has been beneficial in

managing their overall finances. For one participant having her financial aid award reduced

during her second year of attendance added stress to managing her college expenses. The general

sentiment about financial aid throughout the interviews is that the receipt of financial aid is

beneficial and supportive to continued attendance. Not receiving any financial aid for a couple of

students is another obstacle they have to overcome as they persist.

Working While Enrolled. Working while enrolled was another notable theme from the

interviews falling under the category of financial characteristics. Twelve participants at least

mentioned while they were enrolled. Four participants, 4, 7, 9, and 13 shared they work full-time

while enrolled at the community college, and eight participants, 2, 3, 5, 6, 11, 12, 14, and 15

shared they work at least part-time. Participant 2 shares, "I want to be able to still work and go to

classes and a make money" so when she lives on her own, she "will not have to come home and

work my butt off and be poor and broke." She goes on to say, "I'm a waitress so I work 3 days a

week plus picking up shifts on the side." Participant 3 works two jobs while she is attending the

community college, "at a daycare and also at a therapy business." She admits, "Sometimes it's

difficult to really balance out school work with having to help take care of my niece, and having

the two jobs." Participant 4 works two full-time jobs, one at a restaurant and the other in

construction, which help to pay his bills. Participant 7 explains her difficulty in working while

enrolled, she says, "I was working two jobs, but trying to go to school full-time and working two jobs didn't work. So I stopped that, but I still work one full-time job." Participant 9 works full-time and is getting a lot of overtime too, which helps her to pay tuition and pay for her books. However, she shares a frustration with working, "my financial aid had dropped down because I was working so much" to support herself. Because of the reduced financial aid award, she adds, "the amount I've had to pay in my second year, as opposed to my first year was kind-of overwhelming." Participant 12's decision to attend the community college began with being laid off from her full-time job. She currently has two jobs and shares, "I'm an English tutor and I work at the library." For Participant 13, being able to work is important to her and her family. She is a full-time student and was working a part-time job and recently started a full-time job. She also adds that her husband took on more work so she could go back to school.

Working full-time or part-time is a third sub-theme of financial characteristics. Each student that works, twelve out of the fifteen participants, included that managing their responsibilities between working, their coursework, and home adds unique challenges to their experiences as they persist. For the four students that are working full-time while also attending the community college, their time and task management becomes much more important as they try to balance their responsibilities at work and at home with their schoolwork.

The theme of financial characteristics includes the three sub-themes of concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled. Although participants' concern about cost may have led them to attend at the community college, meeting the cost of attendance is still an issue they face as they persist. The receipt of financial aid is perceived as a supporting element to persistence, especially for the participants' receiving some form of financial assistance. However, difficulties and complexities with the financial aid application process and eligibility

requirements present challenges to cover the cost of attendance for participants and their families that do not receive financial aid.

Theme 2: Early Anxious Thoughts

The start of postsecondary education, new experiences and changes in responsibilities for the learning process are all elements that generate varying degrees of anxiety for participants in this study. Early anxious thoughts about starting at the community college emerged as a prominent theme in the interviews.

Participant 3 reflects, "My first semester, I came in very scared and very nervous" she also adds she missed her "public speaking class on the very first day. I was freaking out." Participant 4 admits, "I was a little scared at first" explaining, "it was new. It was a little scary" but once he started getting active on campus it "helped me a lot." For Participant 5, his stepdad attended a community college and had issues with credits not transferring to a four-year university. Because of his stepfather's difficulty in transferring, Participant 5 says, "I was kind-of skeptical at first." Participant 6 shares, "I thought it was going to be a lot more difficult to meet with advisors and financial aid." She continues, "I thought the work was going to be more difficult." She goes on to say, "Probably the most frustrating experience was trying to figure out Blackboard at first" was challenging early experience she was concerned about.

For Participant 7, she says, "It was a little stressful at first (pauses) just because it was brand new and everything was kind-of all at me at once." Participant 9 describes her first year as "easy and hectic at the same time." She adds, "you don't really know if the rumors are true, but you're always told, you know, that the community college is much easier than trying to start at a university" saying "it's always a great kind-of thing to hear." She goes on to say, "I didn't really know how to take the transition of having structured classes to having unstructured classes."

Another element of nervousness for Participant 9 came about when she ran out of scholarship funds at the beginning of her second year. She explains she was "nervous of not being able to come up with the funds for textbooks and how will that affect me in a class situation."

For participant 10, the anxious thoughts were there because he felt there was so much to learn. Participant 11 shares, "It was interesting. It was definitely (pauses) it was kind-of scary because I didn't know what to expect because it was different than high school." Participant 12 admitted she had "spent a lot of time preparing for the placement test." She recalls her experience from the first semester, "I walked on campus on my very first day and I was like, 'I'm so going to embarrass myself. I'm going to fall flat on my face and nobody's going to like me.' It was scary." She continues, "I was homeschooled and graduated when I was sixteen so I hadn't done any school for years. So walking into a new environment completely and having to prove myself on the first day was nerve-wracking."

Participant 13 describes her first semester saying, "It was filled with a lot of fear, and I guess, the feeling of being overwhelmed." She continues, "The first class was kind-of awkward sitting there at first." She adds, "My first semester went way better than expected. I kind-of had the fear that I was going to fall flat on my face my first semester and then jump back in, you know, and be headstrong." She goes on to say a lot of it was difficult because it was different in high school where you do a lot of work in class and go home with smaller assignments. Comparing it to college level work, she says, "You get the basics of what you need to learn and you kind-of go home and apply that yourself" adding you "have to do all the work and bring it in, but that was kind-of a struggle."

Early anxious thoughts as participants began their postsecondary education at the community college was an emergent theme in the interviews. The general sentiment was being

unsure of whether they could 'handle' being in college. For each of the participants that described having anxious thoughts as they began their community college experience, their anxiety dissipated as they finished their first semester and could see that they would likely be successful college students.

Theme 3: Undecided

Indecision with respect to college and career plans was a third theme reflected in the interviews. For some students, the indecision about career and educational plans during their senior year of high school led them to the community college. For others, attending the community college gave participants time to take a few classes and identify their career interests and goals.

Participant 1's goals include finishing up her degree, but has not yet settled on whether she will transfer to another institution. In her words, she "wants to stay close to home" and "keep working on the farm." Participant 4 shares about his early indecision, "I wasn't intending on going to a community college. I took a year off from high school and decided I was either going into the workforce, the military, or maybe go to a community college" but his parents pushed him to go to the community college. For Participant 8, her decision to attend a community college was "for a couple of different reasons. The first," she shares, "was probably that I didn't really know what I wanted to do." Participant 9 admits her indecision at the beginning of the interview "in my senior year of high school, I didn't really know whether I wanted to stay in the state of Virginia or venture out." Participant 11 confesses, "I didn't know what I wanted to do after I graduated high school, and I kind-of didn't want to just stay at home forever, so I guessed I would attend a community college for a couple of years and then transfer." Participant 14 says, attending a community college "gives you the chance to take classes and find out what you were

interested in" and openly admits, "I didn't know what profession I wanted to be in." Participant 15 attributes part of his decision to attend the community college "was to figure out what I wanted to do and where I wanted to transfer."

The theme of being undecided is represented in the interviews as participants share their lack of educational goals or career plans at varying times in their community college experience. The general sentiment in the interviews as they relate to being undecided is that their experiences at the community college have helped them to develop a plan to achieve their educational, transfer, or career goals.

Theme 4: Family Support

Receiving support from members of their family, close friends, and significant others is a prevalent theme from the interviews. A support system, even if it does not include financial support from parents, that encourages and motivates participants to begin and continue attending at the community college is represented in this theme.

Participant 1 shares her support system is "pretty good." She goes on to say, "my parents and grandfather usually ask me how school is going everyday" and adds, "if I have a problem or I need to come [to campus] for an unexpected reason, like for an assignment or something, my parents usually let me come." Participant 2 explains that as being part of a military family with her dad deployed overseas, she chose to attend the researched institution because, "I went to three high schools, two middle schools, and all that, so I'm used to jumping around. Even though I've been jumping around and moving 10 times, I am very, very connected to my family." In her support system she has "my mom, and my siblings, and my dad" and she has "best friends all over the world." Her strongest support, she shares, is "My dad, he's the one who has helped me so much with everything I've decided to do."

Participant 3 goes into detail about the support from her family "My mom and dad are both very good. My dad, like I said, I get some grants through his work and that helps me. And like I said, my mom is very supportive throughout school. She will help me study. She will help me edit papers before they have to get turned in." About her brothers, she shares, "they both help me out too, with the transitions, and classes, and stuff." She adds, "My brothers help me when I am confused in a topic or need help with understanding. They also help to assist with signing up for classes which is great because it is always nice to get a review on a professor before taking them!" She attributes the helpfulness of her support system to the "ongoing encouragement and the help that each family member gives me." She concludes, "My family and my niece are what keep me going!" Participant 4 says, "I get a lot of support from my parents" and attributes help to continue attending the community college to his parents.

Participant 6 shares she lives at home with "my dad, and my sister" but does not receive any financial help from her father to pay for college. Participant 7 explains she usually seeks out her grandparents for support "because they seem to understand me more" but her parents still encourage her to continue. Participant 8 says her support system is "amazing" adding "My parents pay for my textbooks, they pay for my tuition for now at [the community college]. My brother understands that I have a lot of homework to do and I can't hang out with him all the time." She goes on to say, "My parents don't force me to have a job, they pay for my car." About her support system, she adds her family "keep[s] me encouraged, keep[s] me going."

Included in Participant 7's support system are her grandparents, "because they seem to understand me more" and her parents, "they're like 'You've got to do it, you have no option.'" Describing how her support system helps her, she says it is "sort of support, sort of pushing me and making sure I stay in and won't let me quit."

Participant 9 "live[s] with her sister and her two kids while [her sister] is going through a divorce" and says, "I have a lot of support to continue my education." She adds her father is "a single father" that "did not progress past high school" so "there's not that financial support that a lot of kids have." She says although he didn't go to college, he is constantly pushing her to continue. Participant 11 lives with his family but gets more support from his brother. He shares his brother has been "really helpful in supporting me" adding "He gives me guidance. He was actually in the same boat I was doing. But he's been here a lot longer than I have."

Participant 13 is married with three children and says her support system is "pretty strong." She adds, "my children don't really understand, but my husband, he actually took on some more work so I could go back to school." Participant 14 says, "I have a very good support system. I have my mom, my dad, sister, and brother-in-law." She explains she's "really close with them" because "my whole family, they all recognize that college is a really important part of life now, and that you really won't get too far without it." Participant 15's family pushes him and encourages him to keep going. He shares his family, his "mom, dad, and then my little brother" is probably who he falls back on for support.

Two participants attribute most of their support comes from their friends, rather than their families. Participant 5, shares he gets a lot of support from his friends. About his family, he adds, "my family really doesn't bother much as long as I'm getting good grades, they don't' really care." He goes on to say, "They really don't want me to do film and acting and all that" because his stepfather "doesn't think I'm going to get anywhere with that kind of degree." For Participant 12, a lot of her support also comes from a friend. She explains, "One friend in particular that I've relied on through all of this has been very encouraging and helpful." But about her family she

says, "I have a mother and siblings who tend to need more support than they give, but they are there when I need them."

From informal discussions of how their day went, or talking about things they learned in class, the notion of family support is an emergent theme in the interviews. For some participants, the family support includes financial support, recommendations for courses or professors, and even advice about a potential career or transfer plans. For other participants, their primary supports are from grandparents, siblings, or friends that they trust to share their feelings about their experiences. Regardless of who the participant confides in, a strong support system is perceived as a positive influence to persist at the community college.

Theme 5: Determination and Self-Motivation

The desire to finish something started or a degree program, making progress toward educational and career goals, and finding ways to remain motivated help define the fifth emergent theme in the interviews, determination and self-motivation.

Three participants state their motivation to continue comes from their desire to finish what they start. Participant 1 says, she continues attending because "since I have started my degree I want to stay to finish it." Participant 4 shares, "my philosophy is that since I have started, I want to finish college." Participant 9's determination comes from being nearly finished with her degree. She elaborates, "I only have one semester left, and I think that's the think keeping me here, is that I have only one semester left and I'm done with my associate's degree and can venture off."

Four participants share they are self-motivated. Participant 2 explains her determination comes from, "the fact that I feel like I'm going somewhere." She goes on to say she has seen "enough positive results to keep going and to see a future in what I'm doing." Explaining in

more detail, she adds that she "believe[s] that seeing enough positive results from my classes pushes me to want to try harder and succeed. I believe that being able to see positive results is the most important part of what is keeping me here." About his determination and motivation to continue, Participant 4 adds, "I drive myself to continue because I want to be able to succeed in what I know I can do." Participant 12 shares that support from her friends and "my own determination" help her continue at the community college. Participant 15 has not thought about stopping his attendance, saying, "I'm very self motivated" to continue.

Eight participants attribute their desire to finish their degree helps them continue attending. When asked what helps her to continue at the community college, the Participant 1 responds, "Since I have started my degree, I want to stay to finish it." Adding that finishing her degree helps her continue attending, Participant 2 says, "I want to be able to make a difference in the world and I can only do so with a degree." Participant 3 shares, "I really want to be a therapist and have a private business. So, I'm just striving really hard to complete that." Participant 4's desire to finish his degree is clear when he says, "I drive myself to continue college because I want to be able to succeed in what I know I can do."

For Participant 5, the need to continue is apparent in his desire to reach his goals. He shares that taking classes like acting, public speaking, film appreciation and literature are helping him learn about what he will need later on. He goes on to say he's trying to "better myself" and get into the rhythm of "completing things that I need to complete and working hard at something that I actually need" so "keeping me here is me trying to be better instead of slacking off." Participant 7 wants to complete her "degree and move out of Virginia and get a really good job with a big company." Participant 8's decision to continue is helped along because of the type of degree she wants. She shares, "I want to get my associate's degree, and then transfer to get my

Bachelor's, because the program I want to do, which is nursing, looks better if you do the associate's rather than transferring mid-degree." She goes on to say, "One day I want to get a doctorate, so I'm in it for the long haul" and adds, " the community college is like the first step. Get the associate's and then move on. I guess my main desire to eventually get that end goal is the main reason," she continues at the community college.

For Participant 9, her decision to continue attending the community college is helped by her "drive to want to do better." About her community college attendance, she says, "An associate's degree is pretty much the first step in any post-secondary educational journey, so I think knowing, okay 'I need to get this done to move on to a Bachelor's and this for a Master's and so on." Participant 11 explains, "I keep continuing because I want to get that associate's degree, which I'm really close to. He goes on to say, "I think that once I get [my degree], my life will be better.

The participants share a variety of goals and aspirations associated with their community college attendance. Wanting a good paying job, completing their associate degree program, earning a bachelor's degree and owning a private therapy business are a sampling of the goals the participants in this study shared. The overall theme of determination and self-motivation highlights that participants are committed to reaching their goals and encourages them to persist at the community college.

Theme 6: On-Campus Engagement and Interactions

There were four sub-themes associated with a broader theme of on-campus engagement and interactions, including: course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and staff interactions. Course experiences include observations, incidents, feelings, and encounters participants share about classes they have taken at the community college.

Experiences with faculty members within the context of a specific class, as an advisor, or as a source of support are included in the definition of professor interactions. Counseling and advising experiences include the interactions and experiences participants share in the interviews specific to meeting with a member of the counseling and advising staff at the community college. Staff interactions include the experiences and perceptions participants express about student services staff members, excluding the counseling and advising staff.

Course Experiences. Course experiences, both positive and negative, are emergent themes from the interviews. Reflections about experiences and what happens in the classroom are elements that define course experiences. Participant 1 explains that she took only two classes when she began attending the community college. She shares she "had trouble with my English class because of my ADHD," specifically saying, "it's difficult for me to concentrate my thoughts on the paper and also transferring those thoughts onto the paper." Participant 1 reflects, "when I first started taking classes, an impression I got was the class sizes, which were between 10 and 25 students" and because she's mostly quiet, she doesn't interact with her classmates that much. In addition, the participant has thought seriously about stopping her attendance because she "was getting kind-of bored with the classes" and she felt like she was "missing out on stuff that [she] could be learning on the farm. Instead [she] was in class learning stuff that [she] didn't think would have a lot to do with what was going on at home."

For Participant 2, taking a teaching class helped her to see that she did not want to be a teacher and helped her to decide to change her major. She recalls another experience finishing a math class, she says, "I ended up getting a 'B' on my math final" exam, which pulled her grade up to a 'B' for the class.

Participant 3's course experiences also helped her figure her major and career plan. She shares, "My history professor absolutely intimidated me, but honestly, that was the best class I had that semester, so it did park my interest in some other things that I would never have liked before." She goes on to say, "Psychology with [my professor] is actually why I decided to major in psychology, and so that really sparked my interest." Participant 3 also recalls a frustrating English course experience. She explains a major research paper was something they were working up toward throughout the semester. She decided to submit the paper early for optional feedback and says, "I had received an 80 percent," and then worked to address and correct the issues the professor identified and then resubmitted and ended up receiving a failing grade on the assignment.

Participant 6 goes into detail about her experiences with coursework as an online student and a specific experience in an elementary education practicum class. As an online student, the participant says, "I kind-of missed the experience of being part of a campus, which I guess would be different if I came to class. But I don't drive, so I don't have an opportunity to come to campus. I have to be all online." About her elementary education practicum experience, the participant recalls, "I failed horribly. I don't know that I would get this at a big school." She thinks the practicum has been her most memorable college experience because "I think that prepared me most for (pauses) what I'm going to be doing in the future." She goes on describe her research about the practicum requirements and comparing the syllabus with the same course at a four-year institution. At the four-year institution the "class was 30 hours of practicum experience" and at the community college, "it was 40, which was a plus because it gave me more experience." Then she describes the difference in the syllabus for the course at the four-year

institution, saying it " just wasn't as detailed as the one I had." She goes on to add that at the community college, "we had to do lesson planning, we had to break down SOLs."

Participant 9 works full-time and attends primarily in the evenings. Elaborating about her course experiences, she shares her perceptions of the differences in the students attending in the evening. She describes, "you see a whole different crowd than you see coming during the day" the students "are elderly and coming back to school and they're super friendly." She adds, "you also have a large portion of adults who have families to get home to after class, or just work all day and they're exhausted by the time they get in class, and you kind-of see the willingness to want to be here, but not to put in the effort when it comes to group work and things like that, of their participation." She also describes her experience in a developmental psychology course in which they completed an activity called a privilege walk. For the activity, she explains the professor would ask a series of questions, "like did you have both parents growing up, or did you ever have to miss a meal, and depending on your answers you would take a step forward or backward." She goes on to say the experience was memorable because it helped the class "open up and talk about things" and "it gives you the idea of where you stand in society and the privileges you have that you don't realize."

For Participant 10, his most memorable and rewarding experiences at the community college are associated with his experience in a sociology course. His disability makes it difficult for him to communicate and interact. But for one of the presentation requirements in the sociology course, he and his communication partner "worked tirelessly to help me develop my thinking." He recalls, "an audience that valued my words" is the most rewarding part of his life "because the way I communicate is so tedious that other people sometimes lose interest before I finish speaking."

Participant 13 recalls an experience in her anatomy and physiology class. She explains that "at the end, we all just kind-of came together and studied for the final together." She adds, "that was nice because as a class you don't see everybody that wants to come in a couple hours early just to study." Participant 14 also shared about her experience in an anatomy and physiology classes. About them she says, "I really enjoy those. I feel like the teachers try to make it interesting and make it fun, so it's not just like a lecture" because "they actually involve you and link things together."

A variety of course experiences are reflected in the interview data. Some experiences are positive and indicate a positive learning environment, while other experiences highlight difficulties participants have faced in classes at the community college. The general feeling from the interviews is that positive course experiences are associated with engagement activities within the course.

Professor Interactions. Experiences with professors represent another emergent theme in the interviews. There are two specific components participants share about their interactions with professors, the level of interaction, meaning the role of the professor (as the instructor, as a source of support, as an advisor, etc.) and the interaction outcomes, or how satisfied the participant was with the experience.

Participant 1 shares, "interactions with my professors are helpful and informative if I have something I need help with, like an assignment." She also recalls a frustrating experience with an English professor that "wasn't giving me feedback on papers as soon as I would have liked." Participant 2 describes interactions with professors as "very pleasant." Going into more detail, she adds, "I really like the teachers here. They go out of their way to help you. They go way (emphasis) beyond what normal teachers I feel like in a big university would ever do." She

continues, "They'll meet with you whenever. They'll help you if you are taking classes in their classrooms with test anxiety."

Participant 3 describes her interactions with professors as "usually always good." She enjoys the smaller classes because it helps to develop a relationship with the professor, which, she says, "can go a long way when needing recommendation letters." Participant 4 shares that his public speaking professor is "very inspirational in my life and this helped me with all the goings about college." He also adds he feels like he has developed a "relationship, like a friendship" with his professors, that "I've found a bond between them" and they "help me do what I need to do" and "I feel like I can do the same for them in return." About his interactions with professors, he concludes, "I feel like that bond that we have is probably going to last a long time. It has been really insightful and helpful in my life so far."

For Participant 5, his interactions with professors have helped him get experience in his field of study. He explains his weight lifting professor put him in touch with "[the acting professor] about acting and all that stuff" which helped him decide to take the acting class to prepare for his film degree. Participant 6 describes that as an online student, her interactions are somewhat limited because she does not have the campus experience. However, she recalls a specific experience with her elementary education practicum course where "my professor was really understanding" when "I failed horribly" and her professor "worked with me so I got an incomplete" so she does not end up failing the class.

Participant 10 expresses his thoughts about working with professors. He says, "Everyone expects me to look to professors for help. That is not their job." He continues saying, "We take for granted that everyone is able to make their needs known in college. That is not the case in students with disabilities. Even in students without disabilities." His experience as an autistic

student with limited verbal communication is clear in his statement; "Interactions are all like having words in your head that take worlds of time and energy to speak." About his interactions with professors, he shares, "Professors mainly talk to me through my mom, very little interaction there. Because I initially didn't have the ability to do this (referring to the letterboard), so they were not really able to hear my voice." He goes on, "and now that I'm able to communicate with the letterboard, they are starting to interact more."

Participant 11's interactions with professors have an element of humor. He says, "I really like them. I get along with them." He adds, "I like to joke around a lot." Because of that, he feels like "professors pick on me" but that it signifies "a good relationship between the teacher and the students." Participant 12 shares that her student development class professor "was amazing." She then elaborates about professors at the community college in general, "The professors all love what they do and they love what they teach and they love their students." She also describes a particular experience with a professor, "who decided to give us our final as a take home test and let us have a little party on the final day" sharing that the experience was "fantastic."

Participant 7's interactions with professors have not been as positive as other participants' experiences. For the most part, she says the interactions are usually good, fun interactions." However, she explains that one of her scary and frustrating experiences has been "trying to work with some professors that have no willingness to help you at all." She continues by giving an example of "trying to get more explanation as to what they want in a project, or what kind of explanation they want in an answer and they don't want to tell you what they want at all." The frustrating part, she says, is that the professors are "just expecting you to sort it out." Likewise, Participant 9 shares that her experiences with professors have been great with the exception of a select few. The few, she explains, "just didn't make their expectations clear, or

weren't willing to work with you" But the majority, she says, "Have been helpful and lenient." Participant 13's experiences with professors have been similar to participants 7 and 9. After having surgery on her wrist, Participant 13 had a professor that was "not willing to work with me". She shares it was one of her most frustrating experiences and "ended up getting a 'C' in the class" and she knew she could do better. But other than that experience, she describes her experiences with professors as "awesome" because of "the willingness to work with us and teach us and answer any questions that we have." She continues to express that interactions with professors are "usually always positive" and adds that even in online classes, "the communication line is always open." Going on, she shares, "You might not like the answer they give you, but they're being fair."

Participants in this study have shared a variety details relating to their experiences with faculty members at the community college. The general sentiment in the interviews was that interaction experiences were mainly associated with the professor serving as the course instructor or knowledge-area expert. There were three experiences shared where the instructor was working with the participant in the capacity as an advisor or source of support and guidance. Overall, six participants identified their interactions with professors were helpful, supportive, or informative; and four participants identified their interactions were unhelpful or unsupportive.

Counseling and Advising Experiences. Participant experiences with the counseling and advising office at the community college is a prominent theme from the interviews. Reflections about experiences typically include whether the participant identifies the experience as positive or negative, and a description of the type of interaction the participant has with a member of the counseling and advising office staff.

Two participants specifically mention a negative experience working with the Counseling and Advising Office. One of Participant 8's most frustrating experiences is associated with incorrect advising. She shares, "When I first started, I went for an advising appointment and later on I found out I wasn't really advised correctly." As a result of the incorrect advising, she says she, "rearranged her schedule and had to figure out what classes I needed right away, and which ones to make up in the summer." Participant 14 shares she had a similar frustrating experience. She says, "I was misadvised my first semester and so the advisors told me to take some classes that now don't transfer" for a guaranteed admission agreement, "so now I'm trying to play catch up." She adds that being misadvised was frustrating and "puts more stress on me" because, "they knew what college I was going to."

Three participants specifically mention a positive experience working with the Counseling and Advising Office. Participant 1 shares that she has met with her advisor to "plan for the next semester" or if "she has a problem with a professor." Before she started attending the community college, Participant 3 shares she met with someone from the Counseling and Advising Office "and we talked through some things." She describes her experience with the Counseling and Advising Office as "really good and extremely helpful" and was "especially helpful to me with laying out my two years at the college and telling me exactly what to take and not take." She adds the experience was "helpful in not getting left behind" and "graduating on time." As an online student, Participant 6 shares that initially she "thought it was going to be more difficult to meet with advisors." She adds, "being online, I really don't' get a lot of interaction here" but, she says, "every advisor I've talked to has been really helpful, even over email, over the phone."

One student specifically mentions both positive and negative experiences working with the Counseling and Advising Office. For Participant 4, working with the Counseling and Advising Office was difficult at first because of all the steps involved, but he met with one person that was really helpful. He shares it was difficult talking to the "counselors here about stuff" at the institution where he plans to transfer. He adds, "I had to get a sheet and make sure I'm taking classes here that are for the film degree there." He then describes meeting with "a lady and she really understood what I was trying to get across" and says, "That was really helpful." He adds, "I talked to her before this year, and she kind-of put everything in line for me."

Participants in this study expressed a variety of experiences with members of the counseling and advising office staff. Seven of the fifteen participants specifically mention interactions with the counseling and advising office as they recall their experiences as a traditional-aged community college student. Overall, students associate adequate advising as a supportive element to persistence and improper advising as a discouraging element to persistence.

College Staff Interactions.   Another emergent theme from the interviews involves participants' experiences and interactions with college staff. While this theme excludes experiences with members of the counseling and advising office, it includes interactions with the reception area, student life, and financial aid office employees.

Interactions with college staff were identified as being mostly positive or helpful for participants 2, 6, 8, 12, and 13. Participant 2 gushes, saying she feels members of the college staff are, "Super, super, super sweet. Everybody is wanting to help you. They're here to help you and I think that people don't realize that." From an online student's perspective, Participant 6

shares, "I haven't really had any negative experiences here at all. Everyone has been really friendly and really helpful." She adds, "And even if they can't really help me they're always ready to direct me to someone else who can help me."

Participant 8 describes her experiences with college staff, "all the employees are really, really nice." She goes on to add that the "general atmosphere of the school" is "welcoming and caring" and that "people end up caring about you and you end up caring about them" saying that the experience is helpful. However, she does share an experience of catching an employee on a bad day, but said it was nothing major. Going into more detail, she says that those negative interactions are "typically with the Financial Aid Office." She explains, "I am the first one ever in my family to go to college" so occasionally when she doesn't "understand something they'll be like, 'It's not that hard to understand.'" About the experience, she understands "they could be a little frustrated that they deal with that all the time" but does not "think it is ever directly at me." About her experiences with the college staff, Participant 12 says it is obvious "That they love what they do, and they're happy to be at work." She does recall a particular difficulty financial aid as well. She explains, "I know financial aid was difficult for me because I don't meet the requirements for federal financial aid." She continues to share that when she went in to the Financial Aid Office, "the answer I got the first time I walked in was like, 'Oh, then go away.' But since then I've found scholarship applications and stuff like that I'm trying to work on."

The experiences participants 9 and 10 share are different yet important. Participant 9 does not interact with college employees much because she attends primarily in the evening, and most employees have left campus for the day by the time she arrives for class. Participant 10 recalls with college staff is unique when compared to other participants' experiences. With limited

communication abilities, Participant 10 shares that some members of the college staff are mainly interested in "talking to my mom, then others were not interested in talking to either of us." He adds, "The majority of them do not understand autism, so they cannot understand how to help."

College staff interactions represent a fourth sub-theme of the broader on-campus engagement and interactions theme within participant interviews. Despite a couple of frustrating experiences or catching someone on a bad day, interactions with student support services employees are generally identified as positive and supportive to persistence.

Theme 7: Plans to Transfer

Attending the community college with the intent to transfer to a four-year institution is the seventh emergent theme from the interviews. Some participants' plans to transfer include specific degree and career goals; for others, their plan to transfer is not quite as specific. The plan to transfer is also associated with participants' commitments to reaching their goals.

A plan to transfer to a four-year college or university is a theme at least mentioned in 12 participants' interviews. Participant 2 shares she has figured out the classes she needs to transfer, and is currently looking into internships. Participant 3 started at the community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution. She even met with the counseling and advising office and an advisor at the institution to which she plans to transfer before she even started taking classes. Participant 4 attributes part of his decision to attend the community college is associated with "being able to transfer into a 4-year school."

For Participant 5, the concern about transferring has been something he worried about from the beginning. He shares that "my stepdad went [to the community college] but he kind-of had trouble because he didn't have most of the credits he took transfer" to a four-year institution. Because of that, Participant 5 admits, "I was kind-of skeptical at first" about whether he would

have a similar experience. Throughout Participant 5's interview, his plan to transfer is clear. Despite an early setback with plans to transfer, and misunderstanding the 4-year institution's requirements, he is back on track to transfer after speaking with someone in the Counseling and Advising Office.

Participant 6 explains her decision to attend the community college is "worth it to know that with the transfer agreements that everything I'm doing is going to matter." She adds, "I'm not taking credits that are just going to fly away when I transfer." Participant 8 eventually plans to earn her doctoral degree. She shares, "I want to get my associate's degree and then transfer to get my Bachelor's because the program I want to do, which is nursing, looks better if you do the associates rather than transferring like mid-degree." Participant 11 continues to attend the community college because of his desire transfer. He explains, "I really don't want to stay in [my hometown] all my life" he adds, "I'm hoping to get into a four-year so I'm really working hard to get my associate's so I can transfer." Participant 14 also plans to transfer but had to deal with a setback from being misadvised. She still plans to transfer, but is playing "catch-up" to get back on track.

For Participant 15, his decision to attend the community college was, in part, guided by needing to "figure out what I wanted to do and where I wanted to transfer." Instead of attending a four-year institution or going into the military directly after high school, he shares, "my mom didn't want me to go away" so the community college "was the in-between choice. I would give her two years here and then after that I'd be able to go wherever I wanted to." He goes on to share that "something happened where I didn't get all the classes I need" so he will be attending the community college another year "to take more classes."

Twelve participants in this study at least mention a plan to transfer to a four-year institution. For some participants, plans to transfer are central to their experience at the community college, while others briefly mention the goal of transferring. A few participants began their experience at the community college because they were not accepted at their choice four-year institution, while others recognized they did not have a clear plan or idea about what they wanted to study. Participants' general sentiment in the interviews is that completing an associate's degree is a primary step to transferring to a four-year institution.

Participant Experiences as Traditional-Aged Community College Students

This section provides a narrative of each participant's experience as a traditional-aged community college student. Each participant narrative incorporates details about experiences that encourage or discourage persistence.

Participant 1

Participant 1 chose to attend the community college because "it was close to home" and "less expensive than attending a four-year institution several hours away." The participant describes her first semester as "a little bit different from high school. I only took two classes to start off with, and I did pretty good in them." She indicated she "had trouble with her English 111 class because of my ADHD," revealing "it is difficult for me to concentrate on my thoughts on the paper and then transfer those thoughts into my work." This participant eased into her experience at the community college, enrolling only part-time each semester. Outside of responsibilities associated with her schoolwork, this participant "helps her grandfather feed baby calves, cleans out their pens, and then gets cleaned up to come to campus for class." This participant's goals include finishing up her degree. She has not decided whether she will transfer

to another institution. In her words, she "wants to stay close to home" and "keep working on the farm."

Participant 1 associates some of her challenging and frustrating experiences with receiving slow feedback from her professors and her ADHD. "My English 112 teacher wasn't giving me feedback on my papers as soon as I would have liked." In addition, the participant has thought seriously about stopping her attendance because she "was getting kind-of bored with the classes" and she felt like she was "missing out on stuff that [she] could be learning on the farm. Instead [she] was in class learning stuff that [she] didn't think would have a lot to do with what was going on at home."

Participant 1 connects some of her positive and rewarding experiences to interactions on-campus and her support system. Participant 1 describes her interactions with her professors as "pretty good" and "helpful and informative if I have something I need help with, like an assignment." She reaches out to her advisor "to plan the next semester of classes, or if I have a problem with a professor." With regard to interactions with her classmates, she responds, "I'm mostly quiet so I don't really interact with them that much." When asked about her support system, Participant 1 describes, "It is pretty good. If I have a problem or if I need to come here [to campus] for some unexpected reason, like for an assignment or something, my parents usually let me come." She further states of her support system, "I would say that it is helpful, but it is kind of a habit. My parents and grandfather usually ask me how school is going every day." When asked what helps her to continue at the community college, the participant responds, "Since I have started my degree, I want to stay to finish it."

Participant 2

      The participant's personal experiences associated with self-motivation, comparing her first semester attending a community college to her high school attendance, and family support were all elements that encouraged her continued community college attendance. With her father's military background, this participant chose to attend the researched institution because, "I went to three high schools, two middle schools, and all that, so I'm used to jumping around. Even though I've been jumping around and moving 10 times, I am very, very connected to my family. And to be able to mature and get a hang of college while still living at home was very, very, good." She explains further, "I want to be able to still work and go to classes and make money so when I do live on my own and attend a normal college, I'll be able to (pauses) not have to come home and work my butt off and be poor or broke." Her father, from whom she receives a lot of support and encouragement, "recommended it" with the logic that "I would still be able to live at home, still sleep in my own bed, without the pressure of attending a big university and I'd be able to get my head on my shoulders and figure out what I want to do." In describing her early experiences with the community college, the participant elaborated excitedly, "First semester, I was getting the hang of things. I was learning how to take a test that was not high school." She continues, emphatically, "I absolutely LOVED it so much more than high school. She was open and direct, "I realized that I was in college, so I don't have a teacher on my back about doing assignments, which was great, because I couldn't stand it in high school with teachers constantly being on you about certain assignments." The participant shares how she pushed herself, "With the community college, it was all me. I honestly could do it myself and motivate myself and that would cause me to just be proactive. I ended the first semester with all Bs and one A."

Participant 2 identified elements of time and task management, managing friendships, balancing work, home, and school responsibilities as challenges in her community college experiences. She describes positively, "I don't really consider too many things as setbacks because you can always take into consideration the lessons you can learn from it." Some of the things that were more challenging at first, she says, included "trying to figure everything out, like how to get into the swing of classes, learning how to properly study for and take a test." She continues, "I'm a waitress, so I work 3 days a week plus picking up shifts on the side." The participant elaborates further on her academic responsibilities, "I'm taking 13 credits, so studying, maintaining grades, doing assignments, getting everything turned in on time, getting help from teachers, asking classmates for help, and figuring things out." The participant recalls a particularly frustrating experience with managing coursework: "I had a 12 page paper to write, and a 7 page paper to write the next day, and a 5 page paper the next day. It was just more overwhelming, and then finals and what not." She then shares a scary experience dealing with a friend, "The night before I had to take my math final, my friend calls me on the phone, and he's got severe depression, and he was like, 'I can't do this anymore.' He's been like that before but this time he was really scaring me. I only slept 5 hours that night, and then I had to take my math final at 9 o'clock that next morning. And math isn't exactly my strong suit." She recounts this experience again later in the interview, " I'm not that great of a math student, but I ended up getting a 'B' on my math final." Discussing responsibilities at home, she adds, "As far as family goes, I'm the oldest of two other siblings and my dad currently lives in Germany. So I help my mom out with my siblings; I drive my brother to practice sometimes. I also help my mom around the house." Summarizing setbacks, she concluded, "I did not get accepted to a big university

when I applied in high school so that let me go to [the community college]. I did not and have

not had any setbacks during my college experience that has made me want to stop."

There are several supportive elements from Participant 2's experiences described during

the interview including: her support system, experiences with faculty and staff on campus, small

class sizes, and increased maturity. Elaborating on her support system, she offered, "I have my

mom, and my siblings, and my dad, and I have best friends all over the world. My best friend,

she's in Norway going to school, I have a best friend who's at West Point, and then I have a

good friend here, and I work with her." She continues, "I have acquaintances and everything, but

I don't have a big group of people I mainly [interact with]." She explains further, "I'm a

waitress, so I'm able to be social, but not social enough to want to hang out with people all the

time" confessing, I'm kind-of independent." She emotionally describes her relationship with her

dad, "He's the one who has helped me so much with everything I've decided to do. Pretty much,

two years ago, and everything he's told me to do I haven't regretted, and everything I haven't

done that he's told me to do I regret." She clarifies, "[That] is a lot for me because I don't like to

regret things." Continuing, she volunteers, "Pretty much, he's gotten me in contact and helped

me figure out what I want to do." She praises her experiences with her professors, "I really like

the teachers here. They go out of their way to help you. They go way beyond what normal

teachers I feel like in a big university would ever do. They'll meet with you whenever. They'll

help you with test anxiety, stuff like that." She went on to describe interactions with other

employees on campus, "[they're} super, super sweet. Everybody's wanting to help you. They're

here to help you. And I think that people don't realize that, and need to realize that." In reflection

of her rewarding experiences with her community college attendance, she admits, " I have

matured so much and gotten a head on my shoulders. And honestly in the past year, I wouldn't

recognize myself a year and a half ago, or two years ago." She confesses, "A year and a half ago, two years ago, I would've been, if it were up to me, I would have totally been in Colorado being a whitewater rafting instructor, just for fun." She continues describing rewarding experiences, "I'm not that great of a math student. I'd say when I ended up getting a B on my math final allowing me to end up getting a B in the class. That made me so happy because I was so stressed about it." Overall, her experience has kept her motivated to continue. She expresses, "I feel like I'm going somewhere. I've seen results, enough positive results to keep going and to see a future in what I'm doing, and I'd maybe say that I'm more competent with life." She goes on, "I want to be able to make a difference in the world and I can only do so with a degree. I also believe that seeing positive results from my classes pushes me to want to try harder and succeed." She adds, " I believe that seeing positive results is the most important part of what's keeping me here. All this is opening up many doors for my future."

Participant 3

In recalling her decision to attend community college, the participant expresses, "My oldest brother is now 25. He started at a four-year on the actual campus, and ended up coming back to the community college, and then transferred to a different four-year school. And my other brother did as well. So, I just started out at the community college instead of venturing off and switching up and making the overall college experience last longer." Some of her early experiences at the community college include interacting with the institution's Counseling and Advising Office. She describes her first on-campus experience, "I came in, I want to say it was probably the winter before I was going to start in the fall, and we talked through some things." She continues, "I also went down to the four-year school where I plan to transfer and talked to

them about it. And so [the Counseling and Advising Office] really pieced together my schedule of exactly what I needed so that made it helpful."

She continued to explain her decision, "The price is a lot better, and I'm not one for huge classes, so having the smaller class and still being able to have one-on-one with the professor was really helpful." She elaborates, "The flexibility here, with online and hybrid courses, [I am] able to work at the same time." Referring to the flexibility, she adds, "I've taken 4 online classes. And with all 4 they've given you a schedule and tell you what needs to be done within a week, so you can balance yourself out and get that done, which is very helpful."

Reflecting on her first semester of attendance, the participant admits, "I came in very scared and very nervous and I actually walked out with a 3.7 GPA which is higher than I ever had in high school and I've maintained that GPA the whole way." She went on, "My history professor absolutely intimidated me, but honestly, that was the best class I had that semester, so it sparked my interest in other things that I would never have liked before." She lists her public speaking and psychology classes as areas of interest, "I was never one to get up in front of people. But I actually did very good in that class and that helped me with being able to present in other classes." She adds, "The class with [my psychology professor] is actually why I decided to major in psychology, so that really sparked my interest."

The participant goes on to explain why she continues attending, "In high school I did what I had to do to keep good grades, but I never really pushed myself to strive for what I really could be, and so when I started coming here and was interested in new things, and then after the first semester seeing my GPA it really made me feel good." She continues, "And then I got a letter to be accepted on the Dean's List and also part of Phi Theta Kappa for the honors society, so that has really pushed me and motivated me to keep doing better, and so that's why I come."

Participant 3 described frustrating experiences with a professor, and balancing responsibilities as challenges she has faced as a community college student. She explains a frustrating experience, "Missing my public speaking class on my very first day. I was freaking out." Another challenging experience, she elaborates, was with an English professor, "I did really good throughout the whole class. Pretty much the whole semester we were working up towards this big research paper." She continues, "Well, I took the choice to submit it for the optional draft and when I submitted it for the optional draft, I had received an 80 percent, or somewhere along that line." She goes on to clarify why it was frustrating, "Then, I fixed [what] she had put on there to correct and turn it back in. She actually gave me a failing grade for the [assignment]. I was still able to keep my 'A' with that grade, but it was still upsetting to receive an 'F' on something and [the professor] refused to fix it." The participant also describes some of her responsibilities, "In school I do full credit because that's how I can maintain my grants and stuff through my dad's work. And then, outside of school, I work at a daycare and also at a therapy business." She continues, "So, 2 jobs outside of school and I help take care of my niece for my brother." Identifying a particular challenge with her outside responsibilities, she says, "Sometimes it's difficult to balance out school work with having to help take care of my niece, and having the two jobs." She concludes though, "I did not have, and have not had any setbacks during my college experience that has made me want to stop [attending] I plan to continue until next fall. Then upon graduation, I plan to go straight to [the four-year institution] for the spring semester."

A strong support system, financial assistance from her father's employer, positive experiences with faculty and staff, success in the classroom, and determination, are all elements Participant 3 contributes to her continued attendance. She shares, "My support system is

incredible. My mother helps with everything I need, and I mean everything. My dad tries to help with whatever he can, but mostly his help is through my grants and helping to keep me going through all the stress." She explains, "Like I said, I get some grants through his work, and that helps me." She continues describing her support system, "My brothers help me when I am confused in a topic, or need help with understanding. They also help to assist with signing up for classes which is great because it is always nice to get a review on a professor before taking them!" About the support system, she analyzes, "What makes my support system helpful is ongoing encouragement and the help that each family member gives me. It is also made helpful through financial support and the helping hand they extend when I feel too stressed out to even think about school." She concludes, "My family and my niece are what keeps me going!"

Participant 3 reflects on her interactions with professors, classmates, and other college employees, "Like I said, the Counseling Office was really good and extremely helpful." She elaborates, "The Counseling Office was especially helpful to me with laying out my 2 years at the college and telling me exactly what to take and what not to take." She says, "This was helpful in not getting left behind and graduating on time." Going back to the overall classroom experience, she adds, "with having the smaller campus and with having the one-on-one has really helped because I'm not one to sit there and understand everything." She continues, "My public speaking class, for example, having to work with other people helped me feel comfortable in the classroom." Describing interactions with professors, she says, "[are] usually always good. I enjoy the smaller classes because of the reason of it helping to give a relationship with the professor – which can go a long way when needing recommendation letters!" Examining interactions with classmates, she explains, "I have a few close friends, but that is all. However,

when it comes down to working in groups I am one to take over and just get it done, so I work alone."

Participant 3 expresses what helps her to continue at the community college, "With helping with my niece, I strive to do a really good job because I'm one of her role models, of course. And then both my brothers did really good through high school and college, and so I just want to be able to measure up to them." She continues as she explains her goals, "I really want to be a therapist and have a private business. So I'm just striving really hard to complete that."

Participant 4

Parental support to attend, welcoming experiences at the community college, being active and involved on campus, relationships with faculty and staff, and determination to finish are all elements the participant describes in a positive manner about his community college experience. Stressors the participant identified include, managing finances and responsibilities. Sharing about his decision to attend the community college, Participant 4 explains, "I wasn't intending on going to a community college. I took a year off from high school and decided I was either going to go straight into the workforce, the military, or maybe go to a community college." He continues, "My parents were definitely a big push for me to go to a community college. They pushed me to the point and they told me 'You have to go to a community college.'" He reveals, "I was a little scared at first but as soon as I started and got into a lot of things it has helped me a lot." Continuing to describe his decision he includes, "being able to transfer into a four-year school, and go into the curriculum I want to go into, and knowing how flexible and how easy it was to come here." He elaborates, "I felt like I was accepted the first day I came in, so it was really nice to have that."

Reflecting on his first semester, Participant 4 says, "At first, it was new. It was scary, but I was able to get into the dinner show theatre the first semester, and after that, my first year in the spring I was able to do the spring show, and it kind-of opened a lot of doors for me" He continues, "I was able to, in the spring, be on the forensics team. And that's really helped me out because I love acting and speaking." Summarizing he recalled, "It was just very welcoming to me. That's pretty much the one word, welcoming."

Describing his responsibilities, the participant begins with on-campus activities. He says, "I was actually just asked to be an ambassador for the school." He goes on, "Also, I'm on the forensics team, and being in the dinner show theater and the spring show, people come to me for such things like that." Continuing to share about his responsibilities, he adds, "I work two full-time job. I work at [a restaurant] and also I work in construction. At home, I also do most of the chores at the house and making sure everything is taken care of."

Identifying setbacks and frustrating experiences, the participant includes "all the bills that I have for everything else" and "the stress of my life at the moment." Recounting stressful experiences, he shares, "being able to pick my own classes and pick my way through because when I was in high school, they told you what to do, but now that I'm in college, it is my responsibility to pick what I want and to be able to attend class." He admits, "I have the choice to go or not go, and sometimes it's kind-of scary because I could just as easily not go." He continues with identifying some of his frustrations, "papers and exams and everyone gets so stressed at the end of the semester because exams are coming up."

Explaining his support system, the participant says, "I get a lot of support from my parents, and especially from my church, it helps me a lot. And definitely, [my Communication professor] she is very inspirational in my life and this helped me with all the goings on about the

college. He continues, "and then other people at the college have helped me and supported me to be where I am at today." He describes his experiences with professors, classmates and college employees, "I feel like it's kind of like a relationship, almost. Like a friendship." He explains, "It's like they're not just my professors or classmates. I've found a bond between them and they help me do what I need to do. I feel like I can do the same for them in return." He goes on, "I feel like that bond that we have is probably going to last a long time. It has been really insightful and helpful in my life so far."

Recounting his most memorable college experience, he describes "being asked to accept the Michael Boaz Award for Theater and Arts." He confesses, "I felt like I didn't deserve it, but at the same time I took it with gratitude because I don't feel like I should be given an award for something that I love to do." He continues, "They insisted on me having it, and I felt very privileged, and you know, to even be compared to someone like his caliber is very forthcoming." Among the experiences he considers rewarding, the participant includes "doing well in my classes like I did in high school. To be able to have that drive again to go somewhere in life."

He elaborates on the support he's received, "All of college has been really rewarding to me because I didn't really have a way to go." He goes on, "when I came to college everyone was so helpful and they kind-of gave my drive a boost…to figure out what I want to do for the rest of my life and this has been a very helpful part." Discussing what helps him continue attendance at the community college, the participant acknowledges, "Probably everyone I interact with helps me continue." He says, "My parents help me continue." He elaborates further, "The people here are very welcoming so it makes me want to come back and do another year here at the community college." He goes on to explain "What's really helped me with staying in a community college is being able to do the financial aid." Later in the interview, he says, "I feel

like everything around me in this college setting has helped me to be able to continue with what I strive to do."

Speaking about his own determination, he shares, "My philosophy is that since I have already started, I want to finish college." He explains, "Because my parents weren't able to go and finish college because they had real world responsibilities of having kids and such, I thought, 'That if I can go, I can at least go and finish college, and go and do whatever I want to do being they've helped me a lot to be able to come here.'" He goes on, "Between [my parents] and myself, I don't see quitting college until I'm completely finished." He concludes, "I drive myself to continue college because I want to be able to succeed in what I know I can do."

Participant 5

Attending a community college was not the participant's first choice. Recalling the decision he explains, "I applied to [a young, in-state, large public research university located in a metropolitan area] and [an in-state public, comprehensive liberal arts university located in a coastal area] and ended up getting waitlisted, and then not getting in, so then I applied [at the researched institution] shortly after. Providing more detail he shares, "I knew that my stepdad went here. But he kind-of had trouble because he didn't have most of the credits he took transfer." He admits, "I was kind-of skeptical at first. So I figured it out for myself before I applied and I got everything worked out and hopefully it does work out."

Describing his first year, he says, "It was easy. I thought it was easier than high school." He continues, "I actually enjoyed my classes. I look back and I really liked the classes I took and what I learned and thought it was just easier than anything I had done before." Elaborating on his experience, "I feel like since I am at home, I have the freedom to not show up sometimes, so that's not really a good thing, I guess. But I still try to make it in. I haven't really skipped too

much." He goes on, "I think the fact that I've lived here so long and I know the mall is over there, and the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema is over there, so I think about other stuff I could be doing. But for the most part, I come to all of my classes." Sharing about his determination in working toward his goals he describes his interactions on campus with faculty, staff, and classmates, "I knew that in high school because of my relationship with everyone, that I slacked off. So that first semester I didn't want to talk with anyone so I wouldn't be familiar, and I would get my work done."

The participant's responsibilities include working and maintaining his grades. He elaborates, "I have to keep up my GPA and right now I'm just worried about keeping As and Bs and making sure that I'm taking classes that will transfer." He continues, "I have work and pretty much when I'm not [at the college] I'm working."

Describing setbacks and frustrating experiences, he goes into detail about issues with his college transfer process. With disappointment in his voice he explains what is keeping him at the community college, " I need the credits to transfer." Exasperated, he says, "I was actually going to transfer this year because when I was waitlisted they said that once I got 30 credits, I could transfer." He continues, "But then, I dropped a class, and I thought that losing those credits would've hurt me. But then I talked to them and based on my GPA I probably would've gotten in." He goes on, "But then I didn't have a math class, so now they won't accept me at all." Elaborating further he says, "Before 30 credits if I didn't have a math it was fine. But now that I'm 30 credits in, I have to have a math class or they won't accept me." He continues to explain why he perceives it as a setback, "I just kind-of screwed it up for myself because I didn't bother asking. But when I did ask, it was too late." He admits he has sometimes thought of stopping his journey "just because of the stuff I want to do. Everything now just kind-of seems irrelevant

toward it. But I know I really need the college experience and diploma and all that, and so that's what I'm really working for."

Describing another difficult experience, he details working with the Counseling and Advising Office at the college about his transfer process. He begins, "What was difficult was talking to guidance counselors [at the researched institution] about stuff at [a young, in-state, large public research university located in a metropolitan area] and then I had to get a sheet and make sure I'm taking classes here that are for the film degree there. He goes on, "I'm trying to match classes and right now, I'm kind-of running out of options. I'm getting closer to the actual film classes, and they don't offer those here, so I'm running out of things that will transfer to that degree." In terms of frustrating classroom experiences, he shares, "Public speaking was pretty scary at first. But I got over that, so that's probably it."

Participant 5's support system, working toward his career goals, and getting things done, are among the elements that help him continue at the community college. Uncomfortable at first in describing his support system he admits, "I really go to my friends. My family doesn't bother much as long as I'm getting good grades they don't really care." He confides, "[my family] doesn't really want me to do film and acting and all that because my stepdad doesn't think I'm going to get anywhere with that kind of degree." He brightens, "But, my friend is at [a young, in-state, large public research university located in a metropolitan area] now for film and we're kind-of the ones that are always like, 'Yeah, I got your back.' and 'You've got mine.' so that's who I go to." Reflecting on his interactions with faculty, staff and classmates, he shares about his perspective from his first semester and how he's changing, " I'm balancing that. I'm making friends and getting things done."

Among his memorable college experiences, Participant 5 includes taking his first acting class and spending time on campus. Recalling the first acting class, he shares, "I really enjoyed that." He goes on to describe his experiences on-campus, "Sometimes I go to the Student Union and I just feel like I'm away from home, even though I'm here." He continues, "I feel like I'm independent. I just like the feeling of going here, and like, like feeling away from home though I'm still living at home."

Describing rewarding experiences, Participant 5 elaborates, "Hopefully, it's that I learn what I need to, to be successful later on, and I think I'm on that track right now. He continues, "So I think it's taking the classes I need, like the acting class, and public speaking, and film appreciation, and the literature class. I think all of that is really helping me learn more about what I'll need to use later on."

Explaining what helps him continue at the community college, Participant 5 goes into detail, "Mostly the process of getting into a 4-year college. But (pauses) I think mainly I'm just trying to better myself compared to what I did in high school, which was not a lot." He continues, "I'm trying to get into the rhythm of actually (pauses) completing things that I need to complete and working hard at something that I actually need. So, (pauses) keeping me here is me trying to be better instead of slacking off."

Expounding about helpful experiences at the community college, he mentions a specific experience with the Counseling and Advising Office and then elaborates about other experiences with faculty and staff at the community college. He shares, "I talked to one lady and she really understood what I was trying to get across and (pauses) was really helpful. I talked to her before this year, and she kind-of put everything in line for me." He goes on, "Also, I've had teachers that have really helped me." He explains, "I took a [weight] lifting class last semester, [the

professor]'s the one that put me in touch with [the Theater professor] about acting and all that stuff. [The weightlifting professor] told me that we have a good department and stuff, and then that's how I got in touch with [the Theater professor] and I've taken the class." He reiterates, "and so the teachers have been really helpful."

Participant 6

Participant 6 begins the interview sharing that "mostly financial reasons" led her to attend community college. She says, "I just couldn't afford going to [a private, applied liberal arts university within close proximity to the researched institution] and I wanted to stay at home with my family. I didn't want to go away to a 4-year school." She identifies some of the things she considered in her decision to start at a community college, "I did a lot of research to make sure that I was going to be able to find a program that I could transfer seamlessly from [the community college] to [an in-state, public research university, located in the coastal area], which is where I'm going next semester." She continues, "So it was really important to find somewhere that had everything I needed instead of having to jump around between [the researched institution and a larger community college]."

Describing her first semester, Participant 6, shares, "It was really easy. I thought it was going to be a lot more difficult to meet with advisors and financial aid." She elaborates with enthusiasm, "I thought the work was going to be more difficult. I mean, I take classes all online and I love it! I think it's great!" Reflecting on her experiences with faculty, classmates, and other college employees, she says, " Well, because I do everything online, I really haven't had any negative experiences here at all." She continues, "Everyone has been really friendly and really helpful. And even if they can't really help me they're always ready to direct me to someone who can help me." Later in the interview she explains, "Being online, I really (pauses) I don't get a

lot of interaction here. It's mostly online." She concludes, "Even though I'm doing everything online, every advisor I've talked to has been really helpful, even over email, over the phone."

Challenges to Participant 6's community college attendance include managing her responsibilities at home, with work, and schoolwork, financial stress and affordability, and setbacks and frustrating experiences with her coursework and as an online learner.

Discussing her responsibilities, Participant 6 shares, "As an online student particularly, it's really important that I'm constantly on top of what I have to do because professors don't remind you when things are due like they would in a real classroom." She confesses, " So I've become kind-of obsessive-compulsive about keeping an agenda and keeping everything (pauses) all my dates." She goes into more detail about other responsibilities, "I have a job. I'm a community center supervisor and I take care of my little siblings."

Her decision to continue at the community college, she shares is, "mostly financial." She elaborates, "Because I've gone through several times and changed my mind about whether I wanted to go to [an in-state, public research university located in the coastal area], or [a private, applied liberal arts university within close proximity to the researched institution], or somewhere completely different online." She goes on, "And every time, I've come back to the fact that it's so inexpensive for the quality of education you are getting [at the community college] that it's definitely worth it to stay here." She admits, "I haven't thought about quitting college at all, but I have thought about transferring a few times, but I decided against that." She explains, "I thought about transferring a few times just because (pauses) I kind-of, (pauses) especially as an online student I kind-of missed the experience of being part of a campus." She elaborates, "Which, I guess, would be different if I came to class [on campus]." She confesses, "But, uhm, (pauses) I don't drive so I don't have an opportunity to come to campus. I have to be all online." She goes

on, " So, it was kind-of upsetting, I don't know, to not be part of a campus." She justifies her decision, "But it's really more important for me to focus on work and get it all done. I'm going to graduate early, so that's more worth it."

Among setbacks and frustrating experiences, Participant 6 includes her recent practicum experience, figuring out how to be an online learner, and a lack of financial support. Describing the practicum experience, she confesses, "I'm in the education program, the elementary education program, and I just did my first practicum experience and I failed horribly." She continues, "I don't know that I would actually get this at a big school, so it is definitely nice to be at a community college." She brightens, "But my professor was really understanding, and she worked with me so I got an incomplete so I don't have to fail." Her most frustrating experience, she shares, was figuring out Blackboard at first. She admits, "Just because I never used Blackboard in high school. I never took any APEX classes or anything like that so, trying to figure out Blackboard and doing all of my work completely online was a little bit frustrating." She goes on, "But it really wasn't that hard after the first few weeks."

Sharing about her support system, she says, "I live at home with my dad and my sister. And I have a boyfriend." She confides, "It's definitely hard because (pauses) my dad makes enough money to be able to pay for my college." She volunteers that she qualifies for student loans, but not very much in grants, if at all. She expresses it's hard because, "He's not paying for college. So it's kind-of difficult to pay for college by myself or having to take out these huge loans."

Participant 6's positive experiences at the community college include interactions with faculty and staff, going through the practicum experience, and the quality of the education for the price.

Recounting her most memorable college experience, she smiles, "I think, probably this practicum I went through." Referring back to the practicum experience in which she "failed horribly" she says, "I think that prepared me most for (pauses) what I'm going to be doing in the future, and that's really the thing that's stuck out the most so far, and I'm almost done." Going into more detail, she explains the differences between the two practicum courses, " the [in-state, public research university located in the coastal area] class was 30 hours of practicum experience. And [at the researched institution] it was 40, which was a plus because it gave me more experience." She continues, "And then I was looking at the syllabus for that class [at the research university], and it just wasn't as detailed as the one I had here." She recalls, "We had to do lesson planning, we had to break down SOLs [Standards of Learning]." She assesses, "It was an intro class, but it was really in-depth and really intensive, but really helpful."

Participant 6 also considers the practicum experience the most rewarding part of her college journey. She reasons, "Having (pauses) not having, but getting to be in the classroom and having such a supportive professor was really helpful." She elaborates, "It was really helpful to get guidance along the way for everything." She goes on, "There was a huge practicum manual where [the professor] laid out the expectations very clearly and she reminded us along the way of what we were supposed to be doing and that was really helpful."

The participant summarizes, "getting a good quality education for the price I'm paying" and knowing that "with the transfer agreements that everything I'm doing is going to matter" helps her to continue at the community college. She concludes, "I'm not taking credits that are just going to fly away when I transfer."

Participant 7

Participant 7 initially planned to attend a private college. However she decided to attend the researched institution because "I couldn't afford [the private college]" and "I wanted to stay local" in order to "reduce the cost." Some of the things she considered were, "Deciding on which campus to travel to and how often I would have to travel." She shares, "It takes a long time to get to places from where I live" indicating she lived in a rural area of the institution's service region.

Describing her first semester, the participant recalls, "It was a little stressful at first (pauses) just because it was brand new and everything was kind-of 'all at me at me at once.' But, it was good overall and everything worked out for the best."

Explaining her responsibilities, Participant 7 says, " Work, definitely." She goes into more detail sharing that she was working two jobs, but balancing that with going to school full-time didn't work out. She continues, "So I stopped that. But I still work one full-time job, and then I'm taking care of some family that is in bad health and everything."

The participant reveals her most heartbreaking setback, "Finding out I have a heart problem and having to control all the emotions with classes and stress." Linked to the setback, are the frustrating experiences she's had at the researched institution. She shares, "Trying to work with some of the professors that have no willingness to help you at all." She goes into more detail, " Trying to get more explanation as to what they want in a project, or what kind of explanation they want in an answer. They don't want to tell you what they want at all and they're just expecting you to sort it out." She admits that the stress has contributed to her thoughts of stopping her community college attendance or quitting her college journey.

The participant's support system, the desire to achieve her goals, and meeting new people are all positive aspects of her community college experience. Included in Participant 7's support

system are her grandparents, "because they seem to understand me more" and her parents, "they're like 'You've got to do it, you have no option.'" Describing how her support system helps her, she says it is "sort of support, sort of pushing me and making sure I stay in and won't let me quit." Among the participant's goals is the desire to "get a degree and move out of [state] and get a really good job with a big company." Working toward achieving that goal and "Knowing that I can go further in life (pauses) and work for more" is what helps the student continue attending. The participant's memorable college experiences include a field trip with her art class to an art museum, where they "were doing work but, we were also just kind-of learning on our own, looking at all the different worldly aspects."

Participant 8

Sharing about her decision to attend the community college, Participant 8 begins, "Rather than going to a university and spend[ing] like thousands and thousands of dollars doing my first year and then eventually deciding on a program and that college might not have it, it's like a waste of money." She justifies, "community college gives me time to decide and also saves on finances." She continues, "I was homeschooled throughout high school, so I figured community college would be a good transition from being at home 24-7 to being away a little bit, and then I could transfer to a university and be away full-time." She confesses, "It would be a little easier on me and my family." Describing some of the elements in her decision making process, she shares, "probably finances was one of them, how much it was going to cost my parents, and how much it would cost me later in life." She goes on, "Also, I considered travel time because I live in [a rural area of the college's service region], so it's quite a distance." She and her family had to decide, "If community college was going to be worth the gas money. And ultimately we decided it was."

Recalling her experiences from her first year, she says, "It was a really good semester, I would say, to be a first-time college student." She continues, "I think I only took 15-16 credits. It wasn't overwhelming, but the classes were challenging enough so that I was getting an education learning things, but I wasn't totally swamped."

Participant 8 shares that balancing schoolwork and home life, being miss-advised, and navigating financial aid are all challenges she's faced in her community college experience. Discussing her responsibilities, she elaborates, "I don't have a job currently. So I have my school responsibilities." She goes on, "I do tutor my brother in math and he's about 16 and he's homeschooled also. I tutor him twice a week in algebra and geometry." She continues, "I am a student ambassador for the school, so I help out with things like the [fundraising events], the local parade." She also shares about her community and volunteer efforts, "At my church I interpret the worship music for the deaf attenders that we have, so I do the music with that. And then I just do things in the community like the pregnancy center and Relay for Life and volunteer with certain things like that."

She recalls setbacks and frustrating experiences, "Overall, I haven't had a lot of setbacks. I'd probably say like maybe a bad test that dropped the overall grade a little bit, but nothing catastrophic has really happened." She continues, "Probably the most frustrating thing I've had was (pauses) when I first started and went for an advising appointment and later on I found out I wasn't really advised correctly." She goes on, "Which kind-of rearranged my schedule and [I] had to figure out what classes I had to take right away, and which ones to make up in the summer." She summarizes, "that was probably the most frustrating, but I was able to take those classes and I'm back on track now." In addition to the frustrating experience with incorrect advising, the participant also describes interactions with college staff. She shares, "There's only

been one or two times where I've maybe caught someone on a bad day and they were a little rough, but no biggie, everybody has those [days] sometimes." Going into more detail she says, "When they happen, it's typically with the Financial Aid Office. Occasionally when I don't understand something they'll be like (pauses) 'It's not that hard to understand.' But I'm the first one ever in my family to go to college, so it's like, 'Slow down, I don't know what you're talking about.'" She assesses, "But sometimes I think they could be a little frustrated that they deal with it all the time, but I don't think that it is ever directly at me."

Participant 8's drive to meet her academic and career goals, being involved on campus, and her support system are some of the things that help her continue at the community college. Sharing about memorable college experiences, the participant says, " I think probably overall, is just being able to see how much I've matured and how much I've changed dealing with like (pauses) just my parents (pauses) like being homeschooled, but then being able to like (pauses) interact with professors and classmates and go to their offices." She continues, "There are certain days in class, where it's been an amazing day. Something I've learned or something I've had to do that kind-of changed me for the better."

The participant also shares that she is an ambassador for the school. When asked to explain what the ambassadors do, she elaborates, "I give college tours to students that are contemplating coming here, and I've done that a couple times. The VACRAO [Virginia Association of College Registrar and Admissions Officials] events that the state holds, where like the middle schools or high school comes here or we go to them, I've done a couple of those." She continues, "We just give [the students] information about the college." She also shares about participating in college fundraising events for the college's Educational Foundation, participating in the local parade, and leadership summits held specifically for the ambassadors.

Assessing her experience, she shares excitedly, "Overall, it's meeting those people and I play a part in their lives and they play a part in mine, and being able to be like a part of the school's history is just so awesome!"

Thinking about Participant 8's most rewarding part of her college journey, the participant gushes, "Okay, so when I went from high school I was always, like, straight As, you know (pauses), I could handle this. But when I went into college, I didn't know quite what to expect because I didn't have that public school experience. So I was really scared my first semester." She explains she was worried about maintaining 'As' and ending up with a good GPA. She shares her feelings at the end of the first semester, "When they posted my grades in December and I found out I had all As the first semester, that was really rewarding because it was like I can do this." She goes on, "I went from high school, and I maintained that in college." She continues with a smile, "So, I can handle college, I can handle life. And it was just kind-of like a reassurance that I'm okay, and that I'm going to handle this and that I can do it, so it was really rewarding."

Elaborating further on what helps her continue at the community college, the participant goes back to her support system. She says, "My family, you know, keeping me encouraged, keeping me going." She also shares, "I also have that desire to get a doctorate one day, so the community college is like the first step. Get the associate's and then move on." She concludes her desire to reach her goal is the main reason she continues.

The participant reflects on other helpful experiences, identifying the "general atmosphere of the school" as "welcoming and caring" She explains, "I was just talking to [the person at] the front desk for 20 minutes, just hanging out because I love [her], and the people in the Student

Life Office." She goes on, "They're always there for you to talk to. They are friendly. People end up caring about you, and you end up caring about them, so that's been helpful."

Participant 9

Participant 9 admits at the beginning of the interview, "In my senior year of high school, I didn't really know whether I wanted to stay in the state of Virginia or venture out. So I figured this would be a decent way to transition into the collegiate world." She goes on, "There's always that financial (pauses) benefit, of going to a community college for 2 years as opposed to jump starting into a 4-year institution." Elaborating more on what she considered in her decision to start at the community college, she shares, "The finances (pauses) not only the money I would be saving in tuition and books, and fees, and things like that, but the availability of flexing my class schedule here to manage equal time workload as well." She continues, "I would be making more as opposed to going to a 4-year school and starting out in an entry level position making minimum wage the whole time." Another element she considered in her decision was the level of difficulty. She expresses, "You don't really know if the rumors are true, but you're always told, you know, that the community college is much easier than trying to start at a university." She explains her choice with respect to the level of difficulty, "It's not that I had bad grades in high school at all. I was part of the National Honor Society and maintained a 3.9 [GPA] but it's always a great kind-of thing to hear, to help you (pauses) pick." She also details there was a representative of the community college at her high school, "that made the transition a little more comfortable because you had a face to put with the school as opposed to the other 4-year schools because you don't know any of the staff and how they're going to be."

The participant describes her first semester and first year as "easy and hectic at the same time." Her first semester of attendance was the fall semester after completing high school. About

the transition between high school and community college, she shares, "I didn't really know how to take the transition of having structured classes to having unstructured classes." She goes into more detail, "So that was the kind-of easy part because they were a lot easier than I anticipated. So my senior year of high school I was taking all A[dvanced] P[lacement] or honors level courses, and I felt like I had more work in those courses than I did my first semester here, so it was kind-of nice to be a little bit more relaxed." She continues, "At the same time, it was also hectic because I was working 2 part-time jobs, which was equating to about 65 hours per week, so managing that, while going to school was kind-of overwhelming."

Participant 9's challenging experiences include managing responsibilities and scheduling between home, work, and school, navigating financial aid issues, and varying degrees of engagement with individuals on campus. Some of her responsibilities as a student, she explains, includes "look[ing] over the syllabuses (pauses) syllabi, and mak[ing] sure you are keeping up with the due dates of projects or tests, as well as maintaining the classwork and the teacher expectations for all courses." She asserts it is challenging, especially taking between four and six courses each semester.

Balancing life at home and work, she shares, involves living with her sister and two children while her sister is going through a divorce and working full-time. She elaborates, "I help maintain the home life with [the children]. So like homework and baths, and getting them ready for school in the morning." About her current employment, she says, "the company I work for, they are kind-of doing a lot of transitions so there is a lot (with emphasis) of overtime right now that is mandatory as well as voluntary." She goes on, "And while, you know, I am trying to pay tuition and books and stuff, I always take as much of it as I can get, so there's definitely an over full-time work schedule." One of the participant's most difficult experiences relates to "just

figuring out time." She explains that time management challenges her to figure out and balance her priorities. She elaborates about her decision- making process, "I need to work this much time so I can go to school, but with working this much I also don't have this time to do this paper." She admits realizing, "I could have probably gotten an A on [the paper] instead of a B if I had the time has been the most difficult."

Participant 9's most heartbreaking setback is associated with sorting through financial aid issues. She explains, "So, my first year [at the community college] was completely, all paid. I actually ended up getting money back, about $2,400 after tuition was paid and books and everything because of the amount of scholarships and funds I was given my first year." She continues, "I used that responsibly, like I put it toward a down payment for a more reliable vehicle to go back and forth from [home] to [college]. But when I got into my second year, I didn't have some of those scholarships. They were one-time scholarships from high school and my financial aid had dropped down because I was working so much." Expressing her frustration, she shares, "And I guess that it's not really taken into account when they give you, or when the government gives you your financial aid packet, 'like hey (pauses), your (pauses) wages are probably going to these things and not all to the school because some of us support ourselves' and so the amount I've had to pay in my second year as opposed to my first year was kind-of overwhelming. The participant's experiences with financial aid and figuring out how to come up with money for college have affected her. She shares that her father is "a single father, [and] there's not that financial support that a lot of kids have." She continues to share that her most frustrating experience was "probably being nervous of not being able to come up with the funds for textbooks and how that will affect me in a class situation." Another frustrating experience dealt with course scheduling, about which she shares, "with some of the classes that are required

for my degree, they're offered at crazy times so you can't really flex, like I said, with a full-time work load." Giving a specific example, she adds, "a lab I have to take this coming semester is only available on Mondays at 1 p.m. and when you have a lecture and lab block that's 4 to 5 hours, and I can't get off [work] those times, so I have to take it online." She continues, "I'm really nervous about taking a lecture and a lab online because it's something I've never done before and I don't really know what to expect."

The participant openly describes her interactions with professors, classmates, and other college employees. Beginning with college employees, she says, " I don't really run into any of that much because I'm here during the evening time, so that's kind-of limited." Moving next to elaborate on her interactions with classmates in her evening classes, she shares, "you see a whole different crowd than you see coming during the day." She explains further, "So, these are people who, you know, are elderly and coming back to school and they're super friendly, and they're, you know, trying to get study groups together and that's great." She goes on, "And you also have a large portion of adults who have families to get home to after class, or just work all day and they're exhausted by the time they get into class." About the overall engagement, she assesses, "you kind-of see the willingness to want to be [in class], but not to put in the effort because they're exhausted. And so, you kind of see the lack, you know, when it comes to group work and things like that, of their participation." Concluding her discussion of interactions with individuals on-campus, she says, " My experiences with professors so far have been great, except with a select few. The select few," she sighs, "just didn't make their expectations clear, or weren't willing to work with you." She provides an example of frustrating experience with professors, explaining that there are a few, who when she seeks their help for further understanding, their responses lack empathy. She says, "they're like, 'I don't know what you don't understand, it's

right there.'" She continues, "but for the majority [of her professors], they've been helpful and lenient in case I need to make up a test, or I can't make it to class or something."

Participant 9 shares there is a lot of support and emphasis on the importance of continuing her education. She explains, "My father is a single father and I have one other sibling and [her father] did not progress past high school." She elaborates, "He is a contractor and so he does all manual work. And since seeing him and how [his work] is affecting his body, and you know, worrying about how I am ever going to retire, or what if something happens, (pauses) what if I break my leg and I can't work, and kind-of having that backup is good reinforcement." She goes on, "And although he didn't go to college, he's constantly (emphasis) enforcing, kind-of like, 'You need to go so you're not like me,' so that's great."

The participant also shares that the convenience and "hav[ing] one semester left and I'm done with my associate's degree and can venture off" are what is keeping her at the community college. Elaborating more on what helps her to continue at the community college, she explains is "the drive to want to do better." She goes on, "A community college, an associate's degree is pretty much the first step in any post-secondary educational journey, so I think knowing, okay, I need to get this done to move on to a Bachelor's and this for a Master's, and so on." She continues, "and saying, 'Hey, you know you've done 14 years in the education world so far, 6 more isn't going to kill you.'"

The participant then recalls her most memorable college experience, explaining an activity completed in her developmental psychology course. She then goes on to describe the activity, "We did something called a privilege walk. And so we would stand up, and [the professor] would ask questions like, 'Did you have both parents growing up?' or 'Did you have to miss a meal?' and depending on your answers, you would take a step forward or a step back."

Sharing how the exercise impacted her, she goes on, "it kind-of gives you the idea of where you stand in society and the privileges you have that you don't realize." She recalls the class discussion following the activity in which "they all shared how everyone felt and whether they were surprised with where they were standing, and things like that." She attributes the privilege walk activity as a memorable experience because, "it was the most I've seen a group of students open up and talk about things like that. I saw a lot of that in high school and middle school, but I haven't seen it here. There was not a lot of that engagement."

Participant 10

Participant 10 began his attendance at the community college because, "I wanted to go to [a young, in-state large public research university located in a metropolitan area]. The participant cites not receiving a standard diploma from high school as his main reason for choosing to begin his college journey at the community college. One theme consistent throughout the interview from this participant is his concern developing and having a connection with his classmates. About his decision to start at the community college he shares, "I thought about what I would have to do to understand all the students. Like when they were trying to be friends and when they were not." Describing his experience during his first semester, particularly with his classmates, he says, "It was scary, there seems to be so much to learn. All the students seemed to (pauses) all the students seemed very uninterested in me." He expresses solemnly, "So it made life really hard." The participant goes on to share that getting involved on campus was difficult and took courage on his part. He explains, "Sometimes there was someone who asked me to something they were going to do (pauses). So that took a lot of courage on my part."

One of the largest challenges for Participant 10 in his community college experience deals with his communication abilities. In the opening minutes of meeting the participant, he

expressed he was autistic with limited verbal communication. Despite the autism diagnosis, the participant is attentive and very much aware of his thoughts. He explained he just has trouble expressing them in ways others can understand. When describing his interactions with faculty, classmates, and other college employees, he shares, "Interactions are all like having words in your head that take worlds of time and energy to speak."

Sharing first about his experiences with classmates, he elaborates, "Interactions with the students, particularly the very nice students, were not very significantly different from the average students. And partly, that was facilitated by instructors who assigned group projects." He goes on, "So, when I was included as a typical student and included in group projects, I had more of a chance to communicate with those students, and they got to know me and I would be included in some of the things they go to do. Particularly [with] students who very wisely chose me to lead the class in really tough situations." Describing his interactions with his professors, he shares, "Professors mainly talk to me through my mom, very little interaction there. And that's changing. Because, initially I did not have the ability to do this (pointing to the letterboard) so they were not really able to hear my voice. And now that I am able to communicate with the letterboard, they are starting to interact more." Opening up about his interactions with other college employees, he says, "Some of them were mainly interested in talking to my mom. Then others were not interested in talking to either of us." Giving his overall feeling about his interactive experiences with individuals on-campus, he expresses, "The majority of them do not understand autism, so they cannot understand how to help."

In addition to the participant's difficulty in communicating, the participant manages his responsibilities at home and with schoolwork. The participant's responsibilities at home include, "taking care of the trash, grocery shopping, walking the dogs, my own laundry, and cleaning. His

responsibilities with schoolwork include, "staying on top of my assignments, reading the coursework, trying to stay abreast of the schedule".

Describing some of his challenging experiences, he shares, "We take for granted that everyone is able to make their needs known in college. That is not the case in students with disabilities. Even in students without disabilities." Elaborating on specific frustrations, he says, "Everything I do is not like others. I speak with a letterboard. That is not like the average student. So I'm not allowed to be in some classes." He continues, "Some things are too early for me to get to, so I have to skip them. The transportation issue is the main thing that keeps me from attending as much as I would like to." He admits that he has thought about quitting his college journey, "At times, it seems that going to college is not the worst thing to do, but now is not the best time to do it." He continues, "We take for granted the ability to communicate. All students need to be able to communicate. We should be teaching them to communicate their thoughts so that everyone can live again."

Positive experiences in the classroom, a desire to attend a specific four-year university, and his support system are all elements that have supported Participant 10's continued attendance at the community college. Participant 10, despite the communication challenges, has had some positive experiences in the classroom. His most memorable college experience, he shares, was in a sociology class. He explained that he "presented his PowerPoint to people who wanted to learn this method [of communicating with a letterboard]." About the experience, he elaborates, "[It was] very much the result of hard work on the part of my communication partner. She worked tirelessly with me to develop my thinking into what resulted in one small step for mankind, one giant leap for disabled students." He goes on, "The other students understanding me when I wrote my ideas on special education. The way I communicate is so tedious that other

people sometimes lose interest before I finish speaking." He expresses why the experience was memorable, "[Having] an audience that valued my words, that was the most rewarding moment of my life."

The participant continues his attendance at the community college because, "I want so very much to win the respect of [a young, in-state large public research university located in a metropolitan area] to allow me to go there." He specifies, "It's very important to me to win the respect of other students who attend four-year schools." He goes on to say that, "understanding that the only way to get to the true college I want is through my experience at the community college" is what helps him to continue. He offers, "I think that the college should start some kind of program to help people who do not speak to participate more fully."

Participant 10 attributes much of his support to help him through his experiences to, "God." The participant says, "That is where all good things come from." He continues, "We trust in God to really teach us. We trust in God to really show us the way to all things." He also identifies his mother and his communication partner as two other individuals that support him in his educational endeavors.

Participant 11

Participant 11's decided to attend the community college because, "I didn't know what I wanted to do after I graduated high school, and I kind-of didn't want to just stay at home forever, so I guessed I would attend a community college for a couple of years and then transfer." He says, "I think my brother has been the biggest help in that." He shares he had a few questions or things he considered in his decision, "How could I afford it? What would I do? And if I had time to do it."

He describes his first year at the community college, "It was interesting. It was definitely (pauses) it was kind-of scary because I didn't know what to expect because it was different than high school." Overall, he says, "I think it went very well. I think it is a lot more, in a sense, relaxed and I can kind-of do what I want and I'm not on somebody else's time." He goes on, "I got a feel for the classes and being my own man, basically." His most memorable experience, he says, "I think [was] the talent show. I went there to watch my friend and everyone was just amazing. I liked that everyone was so happy and cheering on. That was pretty cool. I really liked that." About his entire experience at the community college, he shares, " Nothing has been too difficult. I think there has been a lot more helpful."

Managing time, balancing work with school, and navigating finances are challenging experiences for Participant 11. Describing his responsibilities, the participant shares, "I work and I go to school" He works between 20 and 30 hours each week, and says "I guess time management is a big deal for me. I just have to manage my time wisely." Later in the interview, he revisits time management and expresses, "I think time is crazy. I feel like I'm always doing something now either with work or school and then homework. And trying to fit in hobbies, like side activities." He goes on identify a second challenge of his experience at the community college, "One of the things that has been holding me back has been financial status. Being able to come up with money." He elaborates, "Basically, I'm on my own. I get help from financial aid, but if I need to make any payments I have to come up with the money." He then identifies a scary experience, "Failing a class." He elaborates, "I haven't failed one, but coming close to failing one is the scariest thing because I know it's my money and I don't want to lose it, or have to do another semester. To me, that's scary because I don't want to stay longer than I have to." He also admits he has thought about stopping his attendance. He shares, "I have once. Because I

was getting a little frustrated because I had a lot of work and I had a lot of homework. I wasn't thinking about quitting all the way, maybe taking a semester off, but I have thought about it."

Participant 11's goal to transfer a four-year institution is what helps him continue at the community college. He says, "I really don't want to stay in [my hometown] all my life. I'm hoping to get into a four-year so I'm really working hard to get my associate's so I can transfer." He goes on, "I keep continuing because I want to get that associate's degree, which I'm really close to. I think that once I get that, my life will be better." The person he relies on most for support, he identifies as "my brother". He shares, "He gives me guidance. He was actually in the same boat I was doing. But he's been [at the community college] a lot longer than I have. He's been really helpful in supporting me." Discussing interactions with individuals on campus, he smiles, "I really like them. I get along with them. Really." He reveals his sense of humor, "I like to joke around a lot. People, I guess, like that. 'Cause they like to make friends with me." He continues, "Professors pick on me, but I feel like that's a good relationship to have between the teacher and the students." He goes on to share he was able to connect well with the college's director of financial aid, saying, "I really like the main guy. He's really cool." About overall connections with people on campus, the participant adds, "People seem to help me along the way. I and I get a lot more helpful information from people, like fellow students that are doing the same degree I am." Participant 11 elaborates on the most rewarding part of his college journey, "I feel like I've done a lot for coming this far. I feel like that is most rewarding because my family is really proud of me, and I'm like one of 3 that has still continued their education and I'm really proud of that." He concludes, " And I feel that if I can actually, like succeed, I can help support my family."

Participant 12

The key points, according to Participant 12, for her to attend the community college were, "it's local and it is affordable." She goes on, 'I had a full-time job for a couple of years and then I was laid off. "During that time," she shares, "I spent a lot of time preparing for the placement test because I wanted to do something. I didn't want to be stuck in retail for the rest of my life." She continues, "it was finances and it was really just planning for the future." She elaborates, "I wanted something more with my life and we have a fantastic community college here that could help me get there (pauses) at least halfway."

One of her scariest or frustrating experiences, the participant reveals was "the initial, like, coming in and taking the placement test." She elaborates, "I was homeschooled and I graduated high school when I was 16 years old, so I hadn't done any school for years." She goes on, "So walking into a new environment completely and having to prove myself the first day was nerve-wracking."

Describing her first semester, the participant explains, "all I took was SDV [the student development course]." Recalling her early experience, she shares, "I walked on campus on my very first day and I was like, 'I'm so going to embarrass myself. I'm going to fall flat on my face and nobody's going to like me.' It was scary." She goes on to say her SDV professor "was amazing. And then I fell in love with the school." She continued her attendance the following fall semester, "I took English and math. It was incredible. The professors were so supportive and it gave me a lot of confidence to keep going."

Participant 12 identifies time management, managing her responsibilities, finances, and setbacks as challenging experiences she's faced as a community college student. The most difficult part about her responsibilities, Participant 12 shares, is time management, "just trying to

get all of it done." She explains, "I have two jobs. I'm an English tutor and I work at the library, and that one's not that much pressure. I really, really like that job. But I also have a family." She continues, "I live on my own. I have a roommate and a dog, and I'm taking care of a household, and a fur ball, and my siblings." She assesses, "There's a lot of responsibility, but I think that it is a part of life." The participant goes on to describe one of her setbacks, "I got a B in my math class, and other than that, I'm a straight-A student. And I'm actually kind-of surprised that I got a B in that class because I didn't get any-thing (emphasis on each syllable) that was going on." She continues, "I was so angry at myself and the professor. I worked so (with emphasis) hard in that class and wanted an A." Another specific challenge she identified was financial aid. She shares, "I know financial aid was difficult for me because I don't meet the requirements for federal financial aid and the answer I got the first time I walked in was like, 'Oh, then, go away.' But since then, I've found scholarship applications and stuff like that, that I'm trying to work on and see if I can get assistance in that regard." In reflecting on her experiences, she admits with a huff, "I've had bad days where I've convinced myself that it's just not worth it [to continue with college], but I always talk myself back out of it within a couple of hours."

Support Participant 12 has received, and interactions with individuals on campus, and in-class experiences are all positive experiences conveyed during the interview. About her support system, Participant 12 shares, "I have a very, very supportive (pauses). One friend that I've relied on through all of this has been very encouraging and helpful." She continues hesitantly, "I have a mother and siblings who tend to need more support than they give, but they are there when I need them." She goes on to describe her experiences on campus. She says, "I was actually very surprised that everyone on campus is so positive. The professors all love what they do and they love what they teach and they love their students." She continues, "And I've gotten

the same thing from most of the administrative staff. That they love what they do, and they're happy to be at work." Moving on to share her perceptions about other students, "I don't spend a lot of time hanging out with students socially. (Pauses.) But they've all been very (pauses) they're at least committed to getting somewhere (emphasis). They may not be committed to the class, but they are committed to getting somewhere." Going into detail about a specific experience with a professor, Participant 12 continues excitedly, "I had one professor who decided to give us our final as a take home test and let us have a little party on the final day and we all brought in food and we hung out. It was fantastic (emphasis)!" She considers her experiences with professors among the most rewarding elements of her college journey so far. Elaborating she says, "The opportunity to get feedback from professors and their input has been incredible." Speaking specifically to what helps her continue, she explains, "just the support and my own determination." She goes into more detail, "I want to have a four-year degree and I want to have the career that is associated with that. So even when I'm convinced that everything sucks, that I'm doing terribly, and I don't want to do it anymore, that vision is motivating."

Participant 13

Cost, reference from a family member, and poor experience at another institution were among the things that led her to the decision to attend a community college. She begins brightly, "My sister had an awesome experience at the community college and I decided that I wanted to give it a go." She continues, "I decided to try some strictly online learning and I decided that it wasn't for me, and I didn't' get the supports I needed." Going into more detail, she says she was looking for, "social interaction with professors and peers." Expressing frustration about the experience, she says, "There was no advising or contact information for departments in regards to financial or general enrollment questions. I found it difficult to contact any professor and

receive a timely response." Going back to her decision to begin attending a community college, she continues, "It was way better priced, and I believe that you get more for your money with the community college. I think the way they disperse their money and what they, help children, or students, I guess, to achieve, as far as funding certain programs here, definitely played a part in my attendance as well." Elaborating more about the things she considered in her decision, she says, "I considered where I wanted to go and what was going to be the most cost effective way to get there." Evaluating the prerequisites she would need and the ease of the application process were also elements she considered in beginning her journey.

Describing her first year, the bubbly personality starts to come through. Giggling, she admits, "it was filled with a lot of fear, and I guess, the feeling of being overwhelmed." She recalls, "that first class was kind-of awkward sitting there at first. But after that first class, everything was just a lot easier." Reflecting on the first year she adds, "My first semester went way better than expected. I kind of had the fear that I was going to fall flat on my face my first semester and then jump back in, you know, and be headstrong." Continuing, she shares, "My first semester kind-of gave me the drive to continue on and be successful." She explains her struggle with the first year in terms of comparing her experience to high school, "You're so used to high school and doing a lot of the work in class, and going home with small assignments" She goes on, "And now it's college level. You get the basics of what you need to learn and you kind-of go home and apply that yourself, and you know, have to do all the work and bring it in." Assessing the experience, she shares, "that was kind-of a struggle. But I think it has taught me to be more accountable."

Continuing to share her perspectives about why she continues, the participant elaborates, "I think a lot of it has to do with the integrity." She explains, "I haven't met a student that has

been just clearly upset with the school itself." Going on, she says, "They might be disgruntled with a certain aspect, or a certain class, or a certain professor. But, it seems like everybody works together to resolve that." With a smile she adds, "If you are upset, they want to know why you are upset and what they can do to help." She continues, "They might not give you exactly what you're looking for as far as the answer, but they're going to give you what they feel is appropriate and they're going to get you to where you need to go." Detailing more about her choice to continue, she says, "I've had an awesome experience with the professors, just the willingness to work with us and teach us and answer any questions that we have."

Among her challenging experiences while enrolled at the community college, Participant 13 includes starting at the community college after having a horrible experience with her first higher-education institution, recovering from surgery on her wrist while still taking classes, difficulties in working with a particular professor during that time. She explains, "I had surgery on my wrist last year, and it was hard because I got some lower grades that I did not expect, because a lot of it was online work, so that was a major heartbreak." Reflecting the challenges after wrist surgery, she adds, "The most frustrating [part] would have been with a professor right after having the surgery not willing to work with me. I ended up getting a C in the class, which I knew I could do better." The whole experience, she says, "was kind-of shocking." She brightens as she continues; "I am retaking those classes so I can get better grades now that my wrist has healed."

In addition to those challenging experiences, she says, "I am a full-time student. I just started a full-time job. I was working a part-time job." She adds, "I am married with three children. (Pauses). So taking care of them, and helping my sister out with my nephews" are

among some of her responsibilities. With a smile and a giggle, she adds, "I think that's it. I think it's enough."

Despite the challenges Participant 13 has faced, she has not thought about stopping her attendance or quitting her college journey. She says, "The community college has made it easy for me to continue on and lead me on the path that I want to go down. They offer a variety of classes. It's just easier to do the two years, and then transfer and finish the four-year." She goes on, "It's just easier this way, so I haven't thought about stopping."

Positive experiences during Participant 13's community college journey includes her support system, interactions with faculty, staff, and classmates, and her determination and feelings of accomplishment contribute to her decision to continue attending.

Sharing about her support system, the participant says, "I have some pretty good friends." She includes her family, her husband and children as part of her support system. She offers, "My children don't really understand, but my husband, he actually took on some more work so I could go back to school." Assessing her support system, she grins proudly, "It's pretty strong." She goes on, "The supports I have [at the community college] and the supports I have at home (pauses) it just makes it easier." She adds, "Definitely the financial aid helps." She concludes with a smile, "Just knowing that if I fall there are a lot of people here that will help me back up."

Detailing her on-campus experiences, she provides an assessment and then a specific example. She begins by describing her interactions with individuals on campus, "It's usually always positive." She continues speaking specifically of her experiences with professors at the community college, "Even if it is an online class, the communication line is always open and there is positive interaction." She adds, "You might not like the answer they give you, but they're being fair." Transitioning to talk about experiences with her classmates, she shares, "The

whole class (pauses) the classmates (pauses) I mean I've met a lot of new friends just being in the classes." She adds she's been in a lot of helpful study groups and reflects "they've all been positive interactions." Giving a specific example of interactions, she recalls her experience in an anatomy and physiology course. She explains, "At the end we all just kind-of came together and studied for our final together." She adds, "that was nice, because as a class you don't see everybody that wants to come in a couple hours early just to study, and [the professor] was surprised himself. [The professor] said that was the first time it happened, and it just made the class a lot easier." About her experiences with professors in general, she adds, "I just think that the willingness of the professors to work with and accommodate so many things, not with just myself but with other students, kind-of gives me the feeling, you know, helping me finish up and kind-of gives me the pride of the sense of being [at the community college].

Reflecting on the most rewarding part of her college journey, the participant shares, "Probably the feeling that I have finally accomplished something." She goes on to explain, "I was out of school for multiple years, so jumping back in and taking pride in myself, of what I have accomplished and what I know I will accomplish here at the community college." In an overall assessment, she concludes, "It has been an awesome experience."

Participant 14

About her decision to attend the community college, Participant 14 admits, "I wasn't ready to leave home. I didn't know what profession I wanted to be in. I kind-of got a good idea of what I want to do now." She repeats, "I just wasn't ready to leave home. I was too young." Some of the things she also considered in her decision to attend were that, "It's a lot cheaper and more affordable. It gives you a chance to figure out who you are as you get a little bit older, and it gives you the chance to take classes and find out what you are interested in." Another reason

she lists for attending the community college is, "To get classes out of the way before I go away." She goes on, "I've always heard that they are easier at this level, and that it's easier to get them out of the way than to take them at the university level." Describing her first year at the community college, she assesses, "It was alright." She continues, "I was misadvised my first semester." Explaining in a slightly frustrated tone she says, "The advisors told me to take some classes that now don't transfer. So now I'm trying to play catch up and that was frustrating." About her decision to continue attending, she shares, "I think that this was a great choice for me individually because I had no clue what I was going to do."

Participant 14 has faced several challenges in her experience attending a community college. The challenges consist of managing her time, balancing her responsibilities, and being alone and dealing with incorrect information from the Counseling and Advising Office. She elaborates saying, "I watch kids everyday. I work at a tanning salon." She includes her schoolwork, "try[ing] to keep up with a social life, and tak[ing] care of the people around me" among her responsibilities." She goes on to explain the difficulty; "It's really hard to take on a lot of processes at once. Because your attention has to be focused on every subject and it's hard to do that, especially with taking on two jobs. It's really hard to balance." One particular setback she identifies is that "all my friends went to universities and I came here and I'm pretty much alone." Her voice trails off quietly as she says, "It was a personal decision." A particularly frustrating experience, she shares was being advised improperly, "and how now it's my responsibility to play catch-up." She continues to express her frustration, "The [advisor] knew what college I was going to, so that's been really frustrating, and it puts more stress on me." Despite the challenges, she firmly states she hasn't thought about stopping or quitting her college journey.

Participant 14 identifies several things, including her support system, memorable experiences in her classes, figuring out what she wants to do as experiences that have helped in her decision to continue attending the community college. Her support system, she shares, is "very good." Going into more detail she says, "I have my mom, my dad, my sister and brother-in-law. My whole family (pauses) they all realize that college is a really important part of life now, and that you really won't get too far without it." She adds, "So, I'm really close with them." Elaborating on experiences on-campus, the participant shares, "Taking classes here and learning that I was interested in anatomy and physiology, and that would lead me to something in healthcare," has been a rewarding experience. She continues, "I just have to play around with that and figure out which path I'll be happy doing everyday." With a since of pride, she goes on to share her most rewarding experience, "I work hard for my grades. I've made the dean's list ever since I've been [at the community college] and knowing I'm going into something that I'm going to enjoy. Among the memorable experiences at the community college, the participant includes her anatomy classes." She says, "I really enjoy those. I feel like the teachers try to make it interesting and make it fun, so it's not just like a lecture." She elaborates, "They actually involve you and link things together." Although she "get[s] along with everybody" she admits, "I don't really go out of my way to make an effort to surround myself with more people." The reasoning she shares is "just because I'm so busy." She summarizes that "catching up on classes," spending more time at home, and having "more time to figure stuff out about life, and how far I want to go in this journey" are all things that help her continue at the community college.

Participant 15

Elaborating on his decision to attend a community college, Participant 15 begins, "I always knew I was going to go to college, but I didn't know where. So part of the reason I came here was to figure out what I wanted to do and where I wanted to transfer." He adds, "It was the best financial choice." He says, "This was the place where I was supposed to begin." Identifying contributing factors, he says were first, "money" and second, "family". He confesses, "My mom didn't want me to go away, so this was the in-between choice." He decided, "I would give her two years here and then after that I'd be able to go wherever I wanted to." He states, "This was just the best choice out of my choices."

Describing his first semester, the participant shares, "It was great. It was a lot better than high school." He goes on, "There was a lot more freedom and a lot more responsibility, but I could always keep the balance." He smiles brightly, adding, "It was cool." Concluding the interview he shares his perspective of the community college, "A lot of people look at community college like 'it is a ranking system. Community college is the lowest place you want to go.' I think community college is a good place" and it is "like any other college."

In his community college journey, Participant 15 has faced setbacks and frustrating experiences, while also managing his responsibilities and schoolwork. His responsibilities include homework, meeting deadlines, driving to and from classes, working, and balancing it all. About his responsibilities he adds, "I think the new responsibility that I have now is probably more like (pauses) I have to wake up, I have to get [to class]. Lie it's all on me now. It's up to me, there's nobody else, it's just me." The participant works part-time, "about 27 hours per week."

The setbacks have been related to his overall college experience and the outcome of a particular class. Seemingly frustrated and puzzled, he shares, "I was scheduled to leave here after two years, and something happened where I didn't get all the classes I need, so I have to stay [at the community college] an extra year to take more classes." He goes into detail about an experience with a particular class. He elaborates, "I never (pauses) I failed a class." He confesses, "Yeah, I'm supposed to be really good at math. But this time I wasn't so good with math class, I mean I failed this class." He adds, "I'm supposed to be a computer guy, so I'm supposed to be really good at math. But for some reason, I failed it, and it kind-of woke me up to where I need to work harder." Continuing to reflect on scary or frustrating experiences, the participant admits "speaking in front of people" has been challenging. With a smile, he adds, "Even when I was dancing I would be scared. (Pauses.) But I'm more comfortable with it now" after he has taken a public speaking class. Despite all the challenges he's faced, the participant has not thought about stopping his attendance. Instead he says, "I'm very self-motivated" and concludes, "I really want to achieve my goals."

Participant 15's self-motivation, his plan to achieve his goals, his support system, and positive experiences at the community college are all things that have helped him continue his attendance at the community college. He shares, "I feel like if I don't do this, there's really nothing else to do except go into the Army or something like that." He goes on, "this is kind-of my path, to get where I want to be." His support system is very important to him and includes "Mom and dad, and then my little brother." He says, "They push me. They keep me going. It's probably who I fall back on." He attributes the most rewarding part of his college journey and his motivation to continue to his desire to 'pay it forward' to parents. He explains in detail, "I've always had this thing to where I've had to pay back my parents. And I would tell them that 'I

have to pay you guys back' for like doing everything that they have done for me. And they say, 'No you don't.' But I'm trying to do the things they didn't get to do. I'm trying to give them like a sense to where it wasn't all for nothing."

He goes into more detail about experiences with people at the community college, and says, "I don't' have any problems with anybody. I try to be very respectful of everybody, whoever I meet." He adds, "I think everyone I've met here has been really cool. Everyone I've met has a story. I really like that." He continues, "I've met some really cool people here. People I can talk to."

Recalling a memorable college experience he shares modestly about winning the college's talent show. He elaborates, "Yeah, I danced. I kind-of wanted to see how I ranked amongst talent wise, I guess." Continuing he adds, "So I was like, 'let me try this out and see if I have enough talent.'" Despite being nervous, he says, "I tried out" and that experience "gave me more confidence."

Inferences Drawn from Participants' Lived Experiences

Visually represented in Table 5, this section offers conclusions drawn from participants' lived experiences as traditional-aged community college students.

Table 5.

Participant Experiences Perceived as Barriers and Supports

Participant	Barriers	Supports
1	Slow feedback from professors	Interactions on campus
	Managing ADHD	Family support
2	Time and task management	Support system
	Managing friendships	Faculty interactions
	Balancing responsibilities	Staff interactions
		Small class sizes
		Increased maturity
3	Frustrating experience with a professor	Family support
		Financial assistance from father's employer
	Balancing responsibilities	Positive experiences with faculty and staff
		Success in the classroom
		Determination
4	Managing finances	Parental support
	Balancing responsibilities	Welcoming experiences
		Active and involved on campus
		Relationships with faculty and staff
		Determination to finish

5	College transfer process	Support system
	Negative counseling and advising office experience	Working toward career goals
		Getting things done
		Positive counseling and advising office experience
6	Managing responsibilities	Interactions with faculty
	Financial stress	Interactions with staff
	Affordability	Course experiences
	Setbacks and frustrating experiences in courses	Quality of education for the price
	Online learning	
7	Medical issues	Support system
	Difficulties working with professors	Desire to achieve goals
		Meeting new people
8	Balancing schoolwork and home life	Drive to meet academic and career goals
	Incorrect advising	
	Navigating financial aid	On-campus involvement
	Occasional staff interactions	Support system
9	Managing responsibilities and scheduling	Support to continue education
		Convenience
	Navigating financial aid issues	Almost finished with degree
	Varying degrees of engagement with individuals on campus	Course experiences

10	Communication abilities	Feeling understood with course project
	Classmate interactions	
	Faculty interactions	Desire to transfer
	College staff interactions	Support system
11	Managing time	Goal to transfer
	Balancing responsibilities	Family support
	Navigating finances	Finishing the degree
		Positive interactions on-campus
		Positive faculty interactions
		Positive staff interactions
12	Managing responsibilities	Support system
	Managing finances	Interactions with individuals on campus
	Time management	
		In-class experiences
13	Medical issues	Support system
	Difficulties in working with a particular professor	Faculty interactions
		Staff interactions
	Starting at a new institution	Classmate interactions
	Family responsibilities	Determination
		Feelings of accomplishment

14	Managing time	Support system
	Balancing responsibilities	Memorable course experiences
	Friends are away at college	Career decisions as result of
	Incorrect advising	coursework
15	Managing responsibilities	Self-motivation
	Course outcomes	Plan to achieve goals
	Missing courses to finish degree	Support system
		Positive community college
		experiences

Conclusion

This chapter has shared the findings from this study and includes participant demographic information and descriptions, and then the identification of the seven emergent themes from the interview data. The seven emergent themes include: 1) financial characteristics (including 3 sub-themes, concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled); 2) early anxious thoughts; 3) being undecided; 4) family support; 5) determination and self-motivation; 6) on-campus engagement and interactions; and 7) plans to transfer. Chapter 5, the following chapter, relates the major findings to the literature, identifies any surprises from the study, shares implications for action and provides recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Chapter five is organized into four major sections. Part one presents a summary of the study, including an overview of the problem, purpose statement and research questions, and a summary of methodology used in this study. Part two summarizes the major findings and returns to the literature review to compare this study with current literature on the topic. Part three offers implications for action, practice, and future research. Part four concludes the dissertation with final reflections.

Summary of the Study

Overview of the Problem

Community colleges have consistently struggled to satisfy student success based on retention and graduation rate measures set by the U.S. Department of Education. Nearly half of the undergraduate students in the United States are enrolled at a two-year college (AACC, 2012). According to data available from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), only 3 out of 10 students who start at the community college complete an associate's degree within 3 years (2011). Because community college enrollment accounts for such a large portion of undergraduate students, focusing on retention and persistence is becoming a more important part of reaching President Obama's degree completion goals.

Various models or theories, including those of student departure (Tinto 1975, 1987, 1999), student involvement (Astin 1984, 1993), and student attrition (Bean 1980, 1985) attempt to explain or predict statistically what happens to students in their post-secondary studies. These models were largely developed through research at four-year colleges and universities, and until the mid-to-late 1990s did not include community college student populations (Tinto & Russo,

1994; Tinto & Love, 1995; Tinto, 1999). Much of the community college retention research focuses on student, academic, economic, and institutional characteristics. Few studies investigate and explore student perceptions and experiences with community college persistence, and retention.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of traditional-aged community college students and the contributions of those perceptions and experiences to persistence. This study was conducted at a mid-sized Virginia community college. The participants of this phenomenological study were community college students and were selected based on four criteria: 1) students enrolled for the first time at the institution in the 2014-2015 academic year, 2) students continued attendance in at least one course the following academic year, 3) students are between the ages of 18 and 24, and 4) students whose enrollment represented their first time in college (no dual enrollment or transfer credits). The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that encourage or discourage persistence?

2. What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that are perceived as barriers while enrolled?

3. What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students perceived as supports while enrolled?

Summary of Methodology

To address these questions, I used a qualitative research approach grounded in phenomenology. This study investigated the lived experiences of traditional-aged community

college students that encourage or discourage persistence, including those that are perceived as barriers or as supports while enrolled.

Data Collection

The data collection phase of this study began in the fall of 2015 and continued through early spring 2016 at a mid-sized community college in the southeastern United States. The data in this study was collected through a brief questionnaire capturing basic demographic information and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 15 community college students enrolled at the time of the interview. Field notes, a reflexive journal, member checking, peer reviewers, thick descriptions, simultaneous data collection and analysis and an audit trail were used as strategies for trustworthiness in this study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Data analysis included transcribing and coding interviews, and then following Moustkas's (1994) modification of van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis.

Participants

A pool of 294 eligible individuals, meeting four eligibility criteria were invited to participate in this study by email (See Appendix B). Fifteen individuals agreed to participate and interviews were scheduled. During the opening minutes of each interview, participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix C) and were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they would be able to withdraw from the study at anytime. Participants were assured confidentiality and that any information linking their responses to their identity would not be shared. Table 2, in chapter 4 of this study provides a visual representation of participants' demographic data. Ten female and five male participants shared their lived experiences with continuing attendance at the community college. Of the 15 participants, one was Hispanic, two were African American, and twelve were White. Of the 15

participants, eleven were enrolled as full-time students, and four were enrolled as part-time students. Additionally, eight participants did not receive any financial aid, five participants received grants only in their financial aid award, one participant received loans and scholarships, and one participant received loans only in their financial aid award.

Participant responses to the 13 interview questions yielded seven emergent themes: 1) financial characteristics, with sub-themes of concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled, 2) early anxious thoughts, 3) undecided, 4) family support, 5) determination and self-motivation, 6) on-campus engagement and interactions including course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions as sub-themes, and 7) plans to transfer. The emergent themes were used to answer the research questions, compared with some of the existing literature, and yielded some surprising outcomes.

Data Analysis

Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis was followed as described on pages 120-121 of his text. Moustakas's modification involved seven steps: 1) listing and preliminary grouping, 2) reduction and elimination, 3) clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, 4) final identification of the invariant constituents and themes, 5) construction of individual textural description, 6) construction of individual structural description from the individual textual description, and 7) construction of textural-structural description for each participant (1994, p. 120-121). An eighth step, then, included developing a composite description of the experiences and perceptions revealed for the entire group of participants.

Major Findings and Connections to Existing Literature

Results of this study unveiled lived experiences and perceptions of traditional-aged community college students that encourage or discourage persistence, and experiences that are perceived as barriers or supports while enrolled. Interpreting participants' experiences that encourage or discourage persistence involved attempting to identify some of the underlying perceptions that support their understanding of those experiences. The current study was guided by the social constructivist paradigm – that the researcher's social interactions with participants will help in understanding how participants' truths associated with educational endeavors are defined by their perceptions and experiences (Hays and Singh, 2012).

As a result of data analysis, seven key themes emerged from the study: 1) financial characteristics, including concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled as sub-themes 2) early anxious thoughts, 3) undecided, 4) family support, 5) determination and self-motivation, 6) on-campus engagement and interactions, including four sub-themes: course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions, and 7) plans to transfer. How these factors interact within the students' experiences and perceptions revealed that traditional-aged community college students face a number of factors in their decisions to continue attendance. In this section, the interpreted meanings of the seven themes are connected to existing literature.

Theme 1: Financial Characteristics

Existing empirical studies have found that financial characteristics such as employment status, tuition costs, and financial aid, influence student persistence (Bers & Smith, 1991; Cabrera, et al., 1992; Hey, et al., 2003; Schmid & Abell, 2003; Titus, 2006; Wessel, et al., 2006) In addition, prior research includes an examination of how the ability to pay for college costs

affects student persistence (Cabrera, et al., 1992; Hippensteel, et al., 1996). Cabrera, et al. (1992) found no direct effect of the ability to pay on persistence; but when the receipt of financial aid and other variables including academic integration, socialization, and the student's desire to persist are considered, there was a significant total affect on student persistence. Conversely, Hippensteel, et al. (1996) found that tuition cost negatively affected within-year student persistence, and that federal financial aid did not mitigate the cost enough to affect student persistence.

This study revealed three sub-themes that coincide with a student's financial characteristics: 1) concern about cost, 2) financial aid, 3) working while enrolled. The three sub-themes are described below and connected to the literature.

Concern about Cost. For many students, going to college is considered an investment of time, energy, and money. In their decision to begin attending college, participants in this study reflected their concern about the cost of higher education, essentially asking themselves, 'Is college worth the return on my investment?' This is not a new question, especially in the discussions found within popular media. The country's economic status and employment opportunities, along with individual expense and income comparisons challenge students to think about the potential benefits of completing a degree.

Students and their parents, even while in high school, are supplied with the message that a college degree greatly impacts earning potential. This message is also supported by the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP), which contends that, "Postsecondary education is undoubtedly a long-term investment that benefits both individual students and society as a whole" (Baum & Schwartz, 2012, p. 9). Consistent with the current study's participants' concern about cost, Baum and Schwartz (2012) go on to share that the perception of college cost is worse

than the reality, "People believe that published prices are higher than they actually are and many students and families are unaware of the magnitude of the grant aid and tax credits available to them" (p. 11). In their report, Baum and Schwartz (2012) also share that uncertainty associated with the return on investment in postsecondary education increases with a weak economy.

Despite their concern about cost, the participants express their desire to have a good job after completing their educational goals, and acknowledge that in order to have a good job, they need a degree. A recent study from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce reports that since 2010, employment opportunities have grown to 6.6 million and 2.9 million of them are considered 'good jobs' (Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Guilish, 2015). Most good jobs, according to Carnevale, et al. (2015), are full-time, include health insurance, and retirement benefits. The report also revealed that 2.8 million of those 'good jobs' went to college graduates.

As reflected in the existing literature, students' concern about cost is not new, and neither is the potential role of financial aid on students' academic and social integration or persistence. The Cabrera, et al., (1992) research explored the role of finances in a persistence model that takes into account prominent retention and persistence research. Specifically, Cabrera, et al., (1992) were looking for the effects of finances on persistence while also considering other non-financial elements, including significant others' influence, pre-college academic achievements, academic and social integration, goal and institutional commitments, and the intent to persist. Cabrera, et al., (1992) found that when added with other variables, financial aid has a significant total effect on persistence. In particular, Cabrera, et al., (1992) suggest the receipt of some financial aid helps facilitate social interactions and a student's determination to persist, which is also consistent with this qualitative research.

The current study adds that at the researched institution, even traditional-aged students are concerned about the cost of higher education, which is perceived as a barrier while enrolled. Among the things they contemplate about beginning and continuing their education at the community college is the level of affordability. Students are also considering the potential return on their investment. For the participants in this study, their decision is that the community college experience is worth the return on their investment, and that the community college is an affordable option.

The general sentiment across all the interviews is that participants want to be able to save money, and see their community college attendance as a way to do so while pursuing their postsecondary educational goals. In their interviews, twelve participants indicated they were working, either full or part-time jobs to help offset their expenses while enrolled. Participants also expressed their knowledge that attending a community college will "reduce the cost" of postsecondary education, and that attending a community college "is so inexpensive for the quality of education, that it's definitely worth it just to stay here". Four participants expressed in their interviews they were paying for college on their own, without the help of their parents or family members. Considering their individual responses and as a group, students seemed to believe, like Participant 15, that attending community college is "the best financial choice."

Financial Aid. The receipt and need of financial aid was another sub-theme associated with students' financial characteristics. Students' perceptions and experiences associate the receipt of financial aid as a support while enrolled, and the lack of financial aid as a barrier. This finding is consistent with existing literature discussing the role of financial aid in student persistence and retention.

Several studies have explored the relation of federal financial aid to persistence (Avery & Turner, 2012; Braunstein, et al., 1999; Braunstein, et al., 2001; Dowd & Coury, 2006; Dynarski, 2003; Mendoza, et al., 2009; Nora, 1990; Perna, 1998; Robb, et al., 2012; Rothstein & Rouse, 2007; Wessel, et al., 2006). Although the conclusions about the impact of financial aid on student persistence vary within the existing literature, the overall feeling is that at least in a small way, the receipt of any financial assistance is associated with a greater likelihood of persistence, and that as other variables are included, like academic performance, social integration, and intentions to continue, persistence also increases.

In the current study, financial aid is beneficial to participants. Data from the opening questionnaire (see Table 2 in Chapter 4) reveals seven participants receive some form of financial aid. A few participants indicated managing their finances was difficult, they also indicated they did not receive any financial aid assistance. Seven participants in this study specifically mentioned that receiving financial aid was helpful. The participants' experiences align with the Cabrera, et al. (1992) findings. Participant 9 received scholarships during her first year, and worked full-time. Her financial aid award was reduced the second year because of her income. She describes her frustration with the reduced financial aid award her second year saying she was, "nervous of not being able to come up with the funds for textbooks" and "how that would affect me in a class situation." For Participant 12, "financial aid was difficult" because she did not "meet the requirements for federal financial aid."

Working while Enrolled. In their interviews, nine participants expressed that they were working part-time while they were enrolled, and four participants indicated they were working full-time while they were enrolled. Overall, their experiences and perceptions about working

while enrolled range from a necessity to manage expenses, to working for extra spending money, to not having to work at all.

Some participants indicate working while enrolled is a necessity to help manage their expenses. For Participant 4, working two full-time jobs, one in construction and a second at a restaurant while enrolled helps him manage "all the bills that [he has] for everything else" despite receiving a financial aid award. He says the bills and finances are elements to "the stress of [his] life at the moment." Participant 4 lives at home with his parents and siblings and is still responsible for completing household chores.

Another participant describes a similar yet different experience of working while enrolled. Participant 9 began her community college experience while working two part-time jobs, "which was equating to about 65 hours per week" at work. Currently she works a full-time job during the day and attends the community college primarily in the evening. About her experience, she says, managing her work schedule and responsibilities while going to school full-time "was kind-of overwhelming." Participant 9 lives with her sister and two children. Her father is a single father and despite him being a contractor, she does not have "that financial support that a lot of kids have."

For other participants in this study, working while enrolled is not a necessity. Participant 1 also lives at home with her parents. Her responsibilities include helping out around her grandfather's farm, "feed[ing] baby calves, and clean[ing] out their pens". The participant wants to finish her degree, remain close to home, and continue working on the farm. Participant 8 is another student that lives at home with her family. Finances was one element she considered in her decision to attend and continue attending at the community college. The participant does not have a job, but volunteers with her church and local community. Participant 10 is another

participant that lives at home with his family but does not work. Among his responsibilities, though, are household chores.

Despite the varying reasons for working, the majority of participants in this study indicated they work either full or part-time jobs, and have continued their attendance at the same community college. This finding does not quite align with the existing literature. Adelman's (2005) description of the traditional-aged community college students indicates they probably work part-time, if employed at all. Bers and Smith (1991) ascertain that as the amount of time spent at work increased, students were less likely to persist. Bers and Smith (1991) also found that unemployed students were less likely to persist than students working part-time. Similarly, Titus (2006) found that students working 11-20 hours per week, and more than 20 hours per week decreased the likelihood of degree completion.

Theme 2: Early Anxious Thoughts

Nearly each participant expressed their early anxious thoughts about attending college, and meeting course expectations. For one participant who was homeschooled and completed high school graduation requirements at the age of 16, returning to college was intimidating because she had not been in school for a couple of years. Getting into, and even back into the routine of managing coursework with other responsibilities was a common theme associated with the early anxious thoughts.

This theme was interpreted as elements of social integration that are discussed thoroughly in the student retention and persistence models and theories. Tinto's (1975) model of student departure suggests that the level of success a student experiences in their pursuit of higher education influences their levels of commitment to the institution, to academic goals, and to career goals. Astin's (1984) model of student involvement includes the student environment and

experiences during college as an element that influences student persistence and retention. Bean's (1980, 1985) Student Attrition Model includes background characteristics and student satisfaction to determine or predict student departure.

A building block of social integration can be found within theories of interpersonal communication. Some of the participants' anxious thoughts were self-attributed to uncertainty about the experience, which is consistent with Berger's and Calabrese's (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory. The basis of Uncertainty Reduction Theory is that people will feel uncertain about others and things they do not know and are motivated to communicate to reduce the uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The theory is primarily associated with aspects of interpersonal communication and relationship development. We experience uncertainty and anxiousness when it is difficult to explain or predict someone's communication behavior. According to Berger's and Calabrese's (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory, we will try to reduce the uncertainty about people we interact with and gather enough information to predict behaviors and communication interactions.

This research adds that at the researched institution, traditional-aged students experience early anxious thoughts about starting and continuing their attendance at the community college. This emergent theme is also perceived as a barrier to students while enrolled. Two participants expressed they were worried about making a good impression and the need to "prove" themselves early in their experience. The general feeling across all the interviews was anxiousness associated with the uncertainty of higher education. Eight participants specifically compared their first semester or their first year to their experiences in high school. Three participants expressed their experience was easier than high school. All the participants seemed

to express their early anxiety similarly to Participant 13, who described her first semester saying, "it was filled with a lot of fear" and "the feeling of being overwhelmed."

Theme 3: Undecided

Indecision about educational goals and career plans is another common theme revealed in this study. Corresponding with Adelman's (2005) profile of traditional-aged community college students this study reveals that participants at the researched institution expect an education, but in their first year participants were unsure of degree and career aspirations. Participant 1 wanted to finish her associate's degree, but had not decided whether she would continue afterward. Participant 2 was pursuing a degree in education, but after her first education class, and thinking about what such a career meant for her travel goals, she changed her major. Participant 3 did not decide on her career and educational goals until she had taken a psychology course. Participant 4 took a year off between completing high school and college and was undecided as to whether he would pursue employment, a career in the military, or college. Participant 6 was undecided about her plans to transfer to a four-year institution. But after completing additional research, she has made up her mind. Participant 7 was vague in her aspirations as well. She indicated she wanted to "get a degree and move out of Virginia and get really good job with a big company." Participant 8 indicated one of the first reasons for choosing the community college was that she "didn't really know what [she] wanted to do" going on to share that "community college gives me time to decide." Participant 9 admits indecision during her senior year of high school led her to the community college. Throughout the interview, Participant 9 did not indicate she had decided on a major or a plan to transfer to a particular four-year institution. Participant 10 only indicated a plan to transfer to a four-year institution, but no degree or career plan. This experience is similar for Participant 11, who also shared "I didn't know what I wanted to do after

I graduated high school." Participant 14 explains her decision to attend the community college, "I wasn't ready to lave home. I didn't know what profession I wanted to be in." Participant 15 shares, "I always knew I was going to college, but I didn't know where. So part of the reason I came here was to figure out what I wanted to do and where I wanted to transfer."

A number of factors can be attributed to a student's decision to attend a community college. Claggett (1989) identified the goals of community college students and categorized them into five categories: personal enrichers, job seekers, transfer preparers, job upgraders, and employers. These categories are still supported by the community colleges and their mission statements (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Vaughan, 2006). In addition, Bers and Smith (1991) found that students attending in pursuit of a degree or transfer are more likely to persist than students attending for other reasons. Indecision about a major or career plan is not uncommon among community college students. Similarly, the Voorhees and Zhou (2000) findings indicate that after initial enrollment, 73 percent of students in their study changed their goals at least once, and the longer students spent at the community college, the more likely they were to shift their goals.

Theme 4: Family Support

Participants in this study expressed family and peer support helps them to continue attending at the community college. The general feeling about family support was positive in the majority of the interviews. Participants described a range of experiences with supportive behaviors and actions with family and friends including informal daily chats, to strong connections to their parents, to financial and emotional support. Participant 1 informally chats with her parents and grandfather daily about how school is going. Participant 3 gets financial assistance through her father's employer, which helps her continue attending. Additionally,

Participant 3 shared that her relationships with all her family members, mother, father and two brothers "are what keep me going!"

Not all participants, though, receive financial support from their parents. Participant 6 lives with her dad and sister, at home, but her father does not help her pay her college experiences. Participant 9 receives a lot of support from her sister and her father, but because her father is "a single father" and he "did not progress past high school" a unique challenge for her is coming up with the funds for books and other expenses. Participant 11 lives at home with his parents who do not provide financial support. His brother however provides a lot of emotional support; Participant 11 shares, "He gives me guidance. He was actually in the same boat I was doing. But he's been here a lot longer than I have."

Two participants in the current study revealed they receive more support from their friends than from their families. For Participant 5, his stepfather is unsupportive of his desire for a degree in film and acting because his stepfather "doesn't think I'm going to get anywhere with that kind of degree." So, Participant 5 relies on support from a friend in the program at the institution in which he plans to transfer. Similarly, Participant 12's support comes from a friend that through all her experiences "has been very encouraging and helpful." The reliance on her friend, she says, is because her mother and siblings "tend to need more support than they give". However, Participant 12 feels her mother and siblings will be there for her when she needs them.

Quantitative studies have found a number of family factors, including parent's education level (Fike & Fike, 2008; Ishitani, 2006), socio-economic status (Bers & Smith, 1991; Fike & Fike, 2008; Gates & Creamer, 1984) influence a student's decision to attend or continue attending a community college. The element of family support is included in Bean's (1985) persistence model, and the Cabrera, et al., (1992) structural model of the role of finances in

persistence. Bean's (1985) exploratory model of student dropout highlights the role of a student's peers in the socialization element of the persistence model. The Cabrera, et al., (1992) structural model includes the role of significant others (family and friends) in the socialization process, and the encouragement they provide students to pursue their college education.

Theme 5: Determination and Self-Motivation

The desire to finish what they start, self-motivation, and the desire to complete their degree program are all goals and aspirations participants expressed that highlight the role of determination and self-motivation in their decisions to continue their community college attendance. Wanting to finish the degree they've started accounted for one of the reasons Participants 1, 4, and 9 continue. Participants 2, 12, and 15 indicated their determination to continue comes from their self-motivation. Similarly eight participants attribute the desire to finish their degrees as a driving factor for them to continue attending.

The notions of goal commitments and personal aspirations are not new to persistence and retention research. The notion of goal commitment is included in persistence and retention models and literature as an element of individual characteristics (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, et al., 1992; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005). Bers & Smith (1991) found that students pursuing a degree or transfer were more likely to persist than those taking courses for other reasons, indicating that the level of goal commitment impacts persistence. Voorhees and Zhou's (2000) exploration of community college student goals and intentions recognized that students attend community colleges for a variety of reasons. They found that students who indicated their goals had been met were more likely to either develop new goals, or to not return to the institution.

Theme 6: On-Campus Engagement and Interactions

The interviews in this study revealed four elements associated with on-campus engagement and interactions: course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions. The appearance of these four sub-themes were not surprising, considering the existing literature and models relating to student persistence highlight the role of academic and social integration (Astin, 1985; Bean 1980, 1985; Bers & Smith, 1991; Choy, 2002; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1999).

Prominent persistence models include the role of academic and social integration. Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1999) model of student departure is based on the central idea that the level of academic and social integration predicts whether a student persists or drops out of college. Academic integration involves elements of course performance (grades), personal development, and academic self-esteem, while social integration involves the degree to which a student interacts with friends or classmates, college faculty, and staff. Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement is based on the concept that student involvement on campus impacts retention and academic success. The major components to Astin's (1985) theory includes a student's background, demographics, and previous experiences, the experiences students have during college, and the student outcomes. Bean's (1980, 1983) model of student attrition focuses on ways student background characteristics and interactions on campus influence students' satisfaction, degree completion commitments, and persistence. In studies replicating or building on the prominent persistence models, the findings are similar. The more students are integrated and involved on campus, the higher the likelihood of persistence (Bers & Smith, 1991; Chang, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

Course Experiences. A sub-theme of on-campus engagement and interactions are the participants' experiences within the courses they have taken at the community college. Overall, the course experiences, both positive and negative, have contributed to their overall community college attendance experience. For some participants, their experiences have been eye opening with respect to helping them to decide on an educational or career goal. Participant 2 shared that taking an education course helped her decide she did not want to be a teacher. Participant 3's experiences in her psychology course helped her to decide to major in psychology and set a goal to become a therapist. Participant 6's course experiences, particularly with a practicum course, helped her to re-focus and be more prepared for her future career. For Participant 14, her experiences in an anatomy and physiology course have helped her realize she wants a career in the healthcare industry.

The general sentiment from the interviews is that positive course experiences are associated with engagement activities within the course. Participant 6 recalls the experience in her education practicum, having to "break down SOLs" and creating "lesson plan[s]." Participant 9 reflects on a privilege walk exercise in her developmental psychology course. She explains the professor would ask a series of questions and then, "depending on your answers you would take a step forward or backward." Participant 10 describes a meaningful experience in his sociology course where he felt understood. For Participant 14, her most memorable experiences are associated with her anatomy and physiology classes because the professors do not strictly lecture, "they try to make it interesting and make it fun" and "they actually involve you and link things together."

Professor Interactions. A second sub-theme of on-campus engagement and interactions, and related to course experiences are interactions with professors. The prominent retention and

persistence models and theories place a lot of emphasis on faculty or professor interactions (Astin, 1984, 1993; Bean, 1980, 1985; Tinto 1975, 1987, 1999). Tests and variations to the prominent persistence models highlight the importance of student-faculty interaction (Bers & Smith, 1991; Chang, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Pascarella and Terenzini's (1980) test of Tinto's (1975) Student Departure Model found that the more students were integrated and involved with faculty, the higher their likelihood of persistence. Bers's and Smith's (1991) test of Pascarella and Terenzini's (1980) research with a community college population found that although levels of academic and social integration differ between students who persist and students who do not, student characteristics like educational objective, intent to reenroll and employment status play differ more substantially between students who persist and students who do not. Chang (2005) suggests that faculty play such an important role in influencing students because of the multiple roles they serve: instructors, role models, employers, advisors, and sources of support and guidance (p. 770). Further, Chang's (2005) research highlights that community college students are more likely to interact with faculty in their role as instructor, and are less likely to meet with instructors outside of class.

The general sentiment in the interviews with respect to professor interactions is consistent with Chang's (2005) research. Nearly all the faculty interaction experiences described by the participants involve the faculty member in their role as an instructor. Most are positive and associate their experiences as supportive. Three exceptions to participants' experiences with faculty members worth noting involve the professors in their role as an advisor or source of support and guidance shared by Participants 4,5, and 6. Participant 4 is involved in a lot of activities on campus, including the dinner show theatre, the college's spring show, and the forensics team. Because he has worked with the communications and drama professor so

extensively in capacities outside the classroom, he feels the support he has received from the professor "is very inspirational in [his] life" and has "helped me with all the goings about college." He continues by saying his professor and other people at the college have "helped me and supported me to be where I am at today." Participant 5's experience is somewhat similar to Participant 4. In his case, one of his weight lifting professors fulfilled more of the advisor role by recommending he get in touch with the communications and drama professor about acting, which is part of his educational and career goals. For Participant 6, the experience is a little different than Participants 4 and 5. Participant 6 is an online student that has little in-person engagement with faculty members. She recalls an experience in an education practicum course where she "failed horribly" her first practicum experience. Participant 6 describes the faculty member teaching the class as "understanding" and supportive as she and the professor worked out a situation where she would receive an incomplete in the course, rather than failing it.

Counseling and Advising Experiences. Continuing with sub-themes of on-campus engagement and interactions, a third type of participant experiences is associated with participants' counseling and advising experiences. Participants' shared a variety of experiences with counseling and advising. Worth noting in these findings is that out of the fifteen participants, seven participants specifically mention experiences with the researched institution's counseling and advising office. Overall adequate advising is perceived as a support while enrolled and improper advising is perceived as a barrier while enrolled.

Three participants classify their experiences with the counseling and advising office as positive or helpful. Participant 1 shares her experiences with the counseling and advising office are mostly to plan for the next semester of classes. Participant 3 specifically identified working with the counseling office as helpful early in her interview. She recalls speaking with someone

prior to starting classes at the community college, and working out a plan to transfer to her desired four-year institution. Participant 6 shares that as an online student her experiences are a little different than students attending on campus. About her interactions with the counseling and advising office, she shares, "Even though I'm doing everything online, every advisor I've talked to has been really helpful, even over email [and] over the phone."

Three other participants share issues with being improperly advised and classify those experiences as negative. One of Participant 8's most frustrating experiences while attending the community college was finding out she had been advised incorrectly during an advising appointment with the counseling and advising office. As a result of the advising error, she had to rearrange her schedule and figure out a plan to take the classes she still needed to get back on track in her program and career goals. A second student recalls a similar experience and the corresponding frustration with being misadvised. Participant 14 shares, "the advisors told me to take some classes that now don't transfer, so now I'm trying to play catch up." Participant 15 also describes an incorrect advising experience. He says, "I was scheduled to leave here after two years, and something happened where I didn't get all the classes I need, so I have to stay here an extra year and take more classes."

One participant shares both positive and negative experiences with the counseling and advising office. Participant 5's early experience at the community college was spent preparing to transfer to a four-year institution. He dropped a course and had been under the impression losing the credits would have hurt his chances for transferring to the institution, and later found out he would have probably been accepted sooner, rather than having to take additional classes at the community college. Participant 5 goes on to express that his later experiences with the counseling and advising office were helpful in coming up with a plan for his transfer process. He

says he "talked to one lady and she really understood what I was trying to get across and was (pauses) really helpful."

What is surprising is that about half of the students shared their experiences with student support services, focusing specifically on experiences with the counseling and advising office. The existing literature associates working with individuals on campus, such as members of the counseling and advising office staff, as elements or evidence of academic and integration (Astin, 1984, 1993; Bean, 1980, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto 1975, 1987, 1999). Specific to community college populations, Fike and Fike's (2008) study shows that the use of student support services provided by the institution, like the counseling and advising office, are associated with an increased likelihood of persistence.

College Staff Interactions. The fourth sub-theme emergent in the interviews are interactions with members of the college staff. This theme incorporates participant experiences with members of the college's student support staff while excluding the faculty and the counseling and advising office staff members. The interactions and experiences participants describe include members of the reception area staff, members of the student life staff, and members of the financial aid office staff.

Six participants in the current study identified positive experiences associated with college employees, while only two participants shared negative experiences associated with college employees. Participant 11 expresses satisfaction with his interactions with members of the financial aid staff, indicating it is one of the offices he has worked with in his experience. Participant 13's perception regarding the college staff is also positive. She feels like everyone works together at the college to resolve issues students may face. Her impression is that college staff members genuinely want to help the students, and "they may not always give you exactly

what you're looking for as the answer, but they're going to give you what they feel is appropriate, and they're going to get you to where you need to go." Participant 2 summarizes the general sentiment with college employees best, "everybody's wanting to help you" and "student services is student services for a reason."

For Participant 8, her interactions with college staff are generally positive, but she remembers one or two experiences where "maybe [she] caught someone on a bad day and they were a little rough" attributing those interactions to the financial aid office. Her perception of the experience was not that the "rough" treatment was directed specifically toward her, and understands that perhaps the staff member deals with similar situations and questions all the time. Participant 10's experience with college staff is notably different than other participants' experiences. Because of his limited communication abilities, he shares that some members of the college staff are mainly interested in "talking to my mom, then others were not interested in talking to either of us" adding that "The majority of them do not understand autism, so they cannot understand how to help." Additionally, one student, Participant 9, does not interact much with college employees because she attends primarily in the evening. Findings from the current study relating to college staff interactions identify specific areas for quality of service improvement.

Theme 7: Plans to Transfer

Plans to transfer to a four-year institution represent a seventh emergent theme from the interview data. Twelve participants in this study mention plans to transfer in their interviews. While some participants briefly mention transferring to a four-year institution, others' plans to transfer are central to their experience at the community college. Participant 3 began attending the community college with the plan to transfer to a four-year institution in mind. Participant 4's

decision to attend was associated with "being able to transfer into a four-year school." Participant 6 is taking advantage of the transfer agreements and acknowledges that attending the community college is "worth it" to know that "everything I'm doing is going to matter." The general sentiment from the interviews is that the community college is a first step toward a bachelor's degree.

The findings relating to plans to transfer are no surprise when considering the related literature. After all, one of the hallmarks of the community college mission is preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Karp, et al., 2008; Vaughan, 2006). Specific to the transfer mission of the community college, Townsend and Wilson (2006) imply that beginning a higher education program at a four-year institution is not feasible because of students' family or job responsibilities and increased tuition costs, which is also consistent with the findings of the current study. Personal aspirations and goal commitment (including plans to transfer) are components of persistence models (Bean, 1980, 1983; Bers & Smith, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Studies linking personal aspirations and goal commitment persistence among community college students suggest a higher level of integration and on-campus involvement is associated with a higher likelihood of persistence (Bers & Smith, 1991; Feldman, 1993; Gates & Creamer, 1984; Mutter, 1992).

Implications

The intent of this study was to add to the literature base concerning traditional-aged community college student persistence by identifying lived experiences and perceptions associated with continued attendance. For colleges to continue to meet the needs of their traditional-aged students, additional research needs to focus on identifying barriers and supports that influence students' decisions to persist. The implications for action and practice are

organized based on the three research questions that governed this study. Table 4 in Chapter 4 visually represents the prominent themes from the interviews connected to the research questions.

Experiences that Encourage or Discourage Persistence

The goal of the first research question was to identify the experiences and perceptions that contribute to a student's decision to begin and continue their attendance at the community college. The 13 interview questions garnered participant responses that describe the essence of their experience as a traditional-aged community college student. Seven emergent themes are associated with experiences that encourage or discourage persistence including: 1) financial characteristics, which includes concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled as sub-themes, 2) being undecided, 3) family support, 4) determination and self-motivation, 5) early anxious thoughts, 6) on-campus engagement and interactions, which includes course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and interactions with college staff as sub-themes, and 7) plans to transfer.

Collectively, these themes indicate student experiences with continued attendance at the community college are complex. Decisions to persist result from a combination of their experiences with social and academic integration on-campus and experiences with other responsibilities, family support, and student finances. While the findings of the current study are consistent with the retention and persistence models developed by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1999), Bean (1980, 1985), and Astin (1984, 1993), and tested by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) and Bers and Smith (1991), the current study also adds the experiences and perceptions verbalized by 15 traditional-aged community college students.

The current study revealed that financial characteristics, particularly, cost, receiving financial aid, and working while enrolled play a large role in encouraging or discouraging persistence. Students are conscious about the cost of attending a postsecondary institution. In their decisions to attend and persist at the researched institution things like tuition and fees, affordability of books, and even transportation costs are concerns. In this study, the students perceived the cost of attendance as something that could be discouraging, but overall, is viewed more favorably than the perceived cost of attendance at a four-year institution. The current study also revealed that receiving financial aid relieves some, if not the majority of the financial burden of meeting the costs of tuition, books and materials, and transportation for traditional-aged students and their families and encouraged student persistence.

The study also revealed that for some students who were not eligible for federal financial aid, the lack of financial aid generated additional stress to meet the cost of attendance, and overall found the experience discouraging. Additionally, the current study revealed that for students whose financial aid award was reduced for a subsequent year of attendance, the loss of financial assistance was considered discouraging with respect to persistence.

In order to meet the expenses associated with attending a community college and to help manage personal expenses students accrue for activities outside of their higher education, nearly all the participants in the study reported working while enrolled. Whether working while enrolled is a choice or a necessity, and whether working full-time or part-time, students in this study reported that employment was a discouraging experience relating to their decisions to persist. The current study revealed that working while enrolled adds the challenge of managing time, and responsibilities, and the students' decisions on how they spend their time can impact their academic success.

Student experiences with anxious thoughts as they began their attendance at the community college represent a second theme in this study that encourages or discourages persistence. In this study, the early anxious thoughts are evidence of students beginning social integration with the community college environment. Students in this study perceive the initial feelings and experiences of anxiety as discouraging to their persistence. However, by the end of the first semester, and as late as the end of the first year, the students expressed the anxiety dissipated as they began to see that they could be successful in higher education.

Indecision about degree and career plans also encourages or discourages persistence at a community college. The current study revealed that for the students who did not have specific educational or career goals when graduating high school, attending the community college gave them a chance to realize and develop their interest and generate a plan to reach their career goals. The current study also revealed that for students who had already established educational and career goals, their continued attendance at the community college provided the opportunity for experience in that area. Additionally, the study revealed that course content, course experiences, and communication with members of the counseling and advising staff, and faculty members, helped facilitate a change in career and educational goals.

The current study revealed that having a strong sense of family support was encouraging to student persistence. The participants who reported strong family support tended to receive both emotional and financial support from their parents and family members as they pursued and continued a postsecondary education. However, participants who reported receiving more emotional support from their parents than financial support, reported feeling encouraged to pursue and continue their educational goals. The participants in this study that reported low emotional and low financial support tended to receive emotional support from close friends,

siblings, and even extended family members, rather than their parents. The current study also revealed that the students with low emotional and low financial support from their families tended to be more independent: living on their own, paying their own expenses, and working while enrolled to support themselves.

On-campus engagement and interactions are a foundational element to persistence; the findings in this study are consistent with prominent persistence and retention models (Astin, 1985; Bean 1980, 1983; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1999). This study revealed that students who had positive experiences in their courses, with professors, members of the counseling and advising office and other members of the college staff perceived those encounters as being encouraging to their persistence. However, students who had negative experiences with on-campus engagement and interactions perceived the incidents as being discouraging to their persistence.

Transferring to a four-year institution is the seventh emergent theme from the interview data. The findings of the current study are consistent with the community college mission of preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2006; Karp, et al., 2008; Vaughan, 2006). The current study also reveals that students with transfer goals reported higher levels of on-campus engagement. Further, the participants in this study indicated their intent to transfer to a four-year institution was an encouraging factor to continued community college attendance.

Experiences Perceived as Barriers

The goal of the second research question was to identify experiences and perceptions that are perceived as barriers while enrolled for traditional-aged community college students as they continue their college journey. Six interview questions, IQ2, IQ3, IQ4, IQ6, IQ7, IQ8, and IQ10 were included specifically to reveal these results. However, responses to other interview

questions also revealed challenges these participants faced in their experiences with continuing to attend at the community college. There were four prominent themes that represented challenges for the participants within their interview responses, including: 1) financial characteristics, including the sub-themes of concern about cost, and working while enrolled, 2) being undecided, 3) on-campus engagement and interactions, including the sub-themes of course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and employee interactions, and 4) early anxious thoughts.

With respect to the theme of financial characteristics, common barriers to persistence participants reported included: their concern about meeting the expenses associated with postsecondary education, losing part of their financial aid award, and working while enrolled. Students in this study were also conscious of how much they were spending and how much they were saving by attending a community college.

The current study revealed that students who do not receive financial support from their parents are responsible for finding other ways to finance their education. Some students reported they were ineligible for federal financial aid because their parents' income was too high, despite receiving no financial support from their parents. Students with such an experience indicated the lack of financial aid was a barrier to their persistence. In order for the group of students ineligible for financial aid with no parental support to persist, other means of funding often included working full-time and balancing coursework with their employer's needs.

While one issue associated with the receipt of financial aid is not considered a mainstream issue in this study, the loss or reduction of a financial aid award had a significant impact for one student. The student was frustrated because she was taking steps to be more independent of her parents, including living on her own, working a full-time job and taking a

full-time credit load at the community college. Despite her steps toward independence, her financial aid award her second year of attendance was reduced because of the income associated with her full-time employment. In addition, the scholarships she received to offset the cost attendance when she graduated high school were one-time, non-renewable scholarships. She perceived her loss and reduction of her financial aid award as a barrier to her persistence.

Findings in the current study also suggest that working while enrolled can be a barrier for traditional-aged community college students. Working full-time or part-time adds to student responsibilities at home and with their coursework. Students participating in the current study who reported working more than twenty hours per week and those working full-time indicated strong time management skills were vitally important to their success. Students who reported issues with balancing employment with other responsibilities indicated that their decisions to work rather than study often meant that they earned a lower grade on an assignment, where if they had the additional time, they would have earned a higher grade.

Another challenging experience for students in this study involved early anxious thoughts associated with beginning their postsecondary education. Findings in the current study suggest that as students begin the process of academic and social integration at an institution, they struggle with their expectations of being college student. For some the nervousness associated with doing something new played with their psyche and generated higher levels of anxiety. Two students in the current study reflected on the experience saying they were worried about "falling flat on their face" and their success as a community college student. Other students reported nervousness associated with completing the placement test, and taking their first couple of classes. For the majority of students reflecting on their early experiences at the community college, their anxiety was perceived as a barrier to persistence. However, once the students

gained experience in the community college classroom, and could see their potential to be academically successful, their anxiety and nervousness dissipated.

Findings in the current study reveal uncertainty about career and educational goals is also perceived as a barrier to traditional-aged community college student persistence. Students in this study who reported being undecided during their senior year of high school, for the first year or two after graduating high school, and even as they began their community college experience, helped them to choose the community college. However, students in this study perceived the lack of a career or educational plan as a barrier to their continued attendance; they did not want to waste money or time, especially at a four-year institution trying to identify their interest. As the students in this study continued taking classes, however, they were able to identify their career interests and set educational goals.

Students in this study perceived negative experiences with on-campus engagement and interactions as barriers to persistence. Negative course experiences, negative interactions with faculty members, negative experiences with members of the counseling and advising office staff, and negative staff interactions were all identified as barriers to persistence by a majority of the interviewees. Students in this study reported negative course experiences, like the lack of peer interaction, failing a class, or being in danger of failing a course, and receiving lower than expected grades on assignments were challenging incidents. The delay in receiving feedback about submitted assignments, the lack of clarity for assignment expectations, and unwillingness to work with students were cited as specific barriers associated with professor interactions in this study.

Negative experiences with the counseling and advising office usually involved incorrect advising. Three participants in this study specifically attribute their advising experience to being

behind a semester, or having to take an additional classes, or spending a summer semester getting back on track to meet their educational goals. An additional student reported both a negative experience with the counseling and advising office associated with transfer planning. Ultimately four of the fifteen students in this study reported negative experiences with the counseling and advising office.

Three participants in the study also reported negative experiences with members of the community college staff as barriers to their persistence. While the three students' experiences are not entirely representative of all the study's participant experiences, other traditional-aged, and even non-traditional-aged community college students with similar circumstances may share their experiences. One participant's sensed she caught an employee in the financial aid office on a bad day. Although the participant did not feel the negative interaction was directed toward her, she expressed the interaction was challenging and that to a student with a different disposition, the interaction could have been more of a barrier to persistence. A second student's experience with members of the college's student support services offices left him feeling like staff members were not interested in talking to him, and feeling misunderstood. The third participant in the study indicated having no opportunity to interact with staff members was a barrier to persistence. While most of the participants in this study reported attending primarily during the day, one student reported she primarily attends in the evening after the student services offices have closed for the day. She indicated she felt frustrated when she needed to meet with someone on-campus because it usually meant she needed to alter her full-time work schedule in order to arrive to campus prior to the end of the business day.

Experiences Perceived as Supports

The aim of the third research question was to identify experiences that are perceived as supports while enrolled for traditional-aged community college students. Seven interview questions, specifically IQ3, IQ5, IQ9, IQ11, IQ12, and IQ13 were included to reveal these results. There were five prominent themes of support from the participants' interview responses including: 1) financial characteristics, particularly the sub-theme of financial aid, 2) family support, 3) determination and self-motivation, 4) on-campus engagement and interactions, including the sub-themes of course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions, and 5) plans to transfer.

Of the three sub-themes associated with financial characteristics, concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled, the current study revealed that students perceive the receipt of financial aid as supportive to their persistence. The students who reported receiving financial aid in the questionnaire and the student who shared she receives financial aid through her father's employer indicated in their interviews that the financial assistance helps relieve some of the stress associated with financing their postsecondary education. Findings in this study indicate that the receipt of financial aid is a supportive element for traditional-aged community college students, which are also consistent with persistence models (Astin, 1985; Bean 1980, 1983; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1999).

The current study revealed students perceive encouragement, understanding, and positive interactions with their families and peers as supportive to their persistence. The findings in this study suggest that students who feel encouraged to continue their educational pursuits by friends and family members tend to persist. From daily informal conversations with family members about experiences in class, to long-distance emotional support from a parent deployed overseas,

and to emotional support and encouragement from close friends rather than immediate family members, the sense of support has helped students in this study to persist at the community college.

A third theme in the current study perceived as supportive to persistence involves the students' level of determination and self-motivation. In this study, students' determination and self-motivation was clear as they expressed their desire to finish their degree, to transfer to a four-year institution, or to enter the workforce. Some students openly shared they were self-motivated or determined to reach their goals. This study revealed that students who were committed to reaching their goals exhibited higher levels of determination and self-motivation. The findings also indicate that students who had higher levels of determination and self-motivation did not think about stopping their attendance at the community college despite discouraging experiences or the barriers they faced.

Positive experiences with on-campus engagement and interactions were perceived as supportive to persistence in this study. Students in this study specifically identified positive course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences and staff interactions as helpful or supportive to their persistence. Students included assignments that provided a sampling of "real world" responsibilities in their intended profession, and experiences in their courses where they were actively learning about concepts, or even coming together and interacting as a class to study for an upcoming exam as positive course experiences.

Students in this study also reported a variety of positive professor interactions. Students typically described their positive interactions with professors in their role as an instructor as "helpful and informative" and "very pleasant." Some students even felt that their professors "went out of their way to help" them be successful in their courses. A couple of students even

described experiences with their professors where they felt the professor took on more of a role as a mentor of source of support and guidance. The findings suggest that professors who actively engage with their students and find ways to interact with them beyond their role as the course instructor develop stronger faculty-student relationships. As a result, students in this study perceived the positive interactions and relationships with faculty members as supportive to their persistence.

Positive experiences with the counseling and advising office was another element of on-campus engagement and interactions where students perceived they were supported to continue their education. Whether meeting with a member of the counseling and advising staff to plan courses for a subsequent semester, or to plan out progress toward their degree program, or even laying out plans to transfer to a four-year institution, students in this study reported positive experiences with the counseling and advising office were supportive. Overall, students in this study perceive that when they have been adequately advised, or they are satisfied with experience and feel supported in pursuing their program of study.

Similarly, positive college staff interactions are also associated with supportive experiences by students in the current study. As they reflected on their experiences in the interviews, students described members of the college staff and the general atmosphere of the college as being welcoming and caring, helpful, and friendly. Participants 2 and 6 (respectively) express the general sentiment about the college staff best, "everybody is wanting to help you" and "even if they can't really help [you] they're always read to direct [you] to someone else who can help." The current study reveals that students who feel like their needs are being met by their interactions with the college staff, or have satisfying experiences with the college staff also feel supported in continuing their education.

Whether the student started at the community college with the intent to transfer to a four-year institution, or whether the student developed plans to transfer to a four year institution over the course of their enrollment at the community college, this study reveals that plans to transfer are supportive to a students persistence. This finding is consistent with the notion of goal commitment and personal aspirations in the persistence literature and models (Bean, 1980, 1983; Bers & Smith, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Students in the current study with a strong sense of commitment and motivation to reaching their educational and transfer goals reported richer course experiences and interactions during their interviews. Students who reported they started the community college with the intent to transfer to a four-year institution were also more likely to be engaged and participate in extra-curricular activities on campus like the student ambassadors program, and theater, drama and talent programs. This finding is also consistent with literature connecting personal aspirations and goal commitment to on-campus involvement and persistence (Bers & Smith, 1991; Feldman, 1993; Gates & Creamer, 1984; Mutter, 1992).

Recommendations

Some of the resultant insights from this qualitative phenomenological study and the literature review do not appear to be unique to the researched institution (Bers & Smith, 1991; Chang, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Therefore, some of the lived experiences of traditional-aged community college students who were participants in this study may be valuable to community college administrators and individuals in policy or decision-making roles tasked with identifying and developing current and future student retention and persistence strategies.

Recommendations for faculty, staff, and administrators. Practical applications of the findings from the current study are for community college faculty, staff and administrators to

expand their understanding and knowledge of their roles in traditional student retention and persistence efforts. Recommendations below are specific to the themes and issues emergent from participant interviews in this study. The first two recommendations are linked to four themes: undecided, on-campus engagement and interactions (specifically the sub-themes of professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions) as well as plans to transfer.

1. Develop and maintain a database with transfer procedures and transferrable courses for institutions with guaranteed admission or articulation agreements.

2. Develop and maintain a database with academic advising information for each program of study offered at the community college in effort to minimize incorrect advising experiences.

A team including members of the counseling and advising office, the admissions and records office and academic deans should be organized to identify and approve a listing and/or a database of courses and degree programs offered by the college that are transferrable to institutions that have existing transfer and guaranteed admissions agreements with the college. The same database, or even a separate one could also include academic advising information, like potential electives, degree requirements, and a suggested academic plan. The database(s) and collected information should then be made available through a student portal or website for potential and current students and well as other members of the college serving in an academic advising capacity. Such a listing or database would be useful for all students attending the community college, not just traditional-aged students.

3. At least one member of the college staff familiar with all aspects of student services offices should be assigned to provide support to students primarily attending in the

evening an opportunity to receive assistance while on-campus and not have to make a separate trip to campus during the day for assistance.

The third recommendation is linked to the theme of on-campus engagement and interactions, specifically counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions, and arises out of student reports of not having services available when they are on campus in the evening. Having at least one knowledgeable member of the staff on-duty during the evening could potentially eliminate the need for students to make an additional trip to campus at a time inconvenient with their work schedule or other responsibilities. While this recommendation arises from the experience of one traditional-aged community college student, such a change in service hours could assist non-traditional students that also work during the day.

4. Address issues of poor student service by members of the college staff.

This particular recommendation arises from the description of sub-standard interactions by two different participants in this study, and is linked to the theme of on-campus engagement and interactions, specifically, college staff interactions. Early interactions and impressions of an institution's atmosphere often impacts students and their decision to attend, and perception of the type of experiences they will continue to have at the institution, whether positive or negative. So, in order to continue to have a favorable impression, issues of poor student service should be identified and addressed. The difficulty is that sometimes students are reluctant to convey the negative experiences to an official on campus; students may let their reaction fester and perpetuate the negative experience by exhibiting behavior similar to what they experienced in future interactions.

A couple of ways to manage such a situation involves developing a process for students to anonymously report the experience and then having processes in place to address the service

experience. One such way would be to report the experience would be to have a drop box, email address, incident form, or even items in a current student survey available for students to share their experiences with members of the college staff.

A student advocate such as a dean of students, or student ombudsman could then monitor submissions and take action where necessary. This would allow students to identify both their positive and negative experiences in a way that could be reported in aggregate and then shared with appropriate department supervisors. To address the negative service experiences, supervisors could then meet with individuals who have repeated complaints, set a plan for improvement, and then monitor the individual for improvement. To address the positive service experiences, supervisors could choose to recognize individuals in staff and department meetings for their outstanding service to students.

5. Provide training opportunities in customer service for student support services employees in high-traffic, high-stress areas, including part-time staff members.

This recommendation is linked to the theme of on-campus engagement and interactions, and is aimed at improving students' experiences with counseling and advising, and college staff interactions. The recommendation could be implemented in a variety of ways. The college could utilize their workforce development and professional development day programs to train new and current employees in customer service. This could also be implemented as part of the on-boarding or orientation processes for newly hired employees working in the student services offices. Such training could include basic interpersonal interaction skills in the office atmosphere, managing tense situations, delivering negative news, employee shadowing experiences, and a basic orientation to the college, and the student populations the college serves.

6. Provide opportunities for on-campus student-to-student interactions, both in and out of the classroom.

Recommendation number six involves encouraging professors and members of the student services staff, including the counseling advising and student life departments to generate program that provides students the opportunity to interact with each other outside of class. This recommendation is also linked with the theme of on-campus engagement and interactions. Programming could include celebrations of diversity months like Black History Month, Women's History Month, etc., club fairs, transfer fairs, job fairs. While the researched institution already offers some of this programming throughout the year, continuing the programming into the evening so that students working or taking classes during the day also have the opportunity to participate in the events.

For student-to-student interactions in the classrooms faculty members should consider developing and utilizing activities, when possible, that promote discussion, provide experiential learning activities, and gives students the opportunity to interact more rather than listening to lectures. Students in this study reported the opportunities they had for similar interaction in their class were helpful and engaging, and encouraged them to continue their studies at the community college. For faculty members wishing to generate more student-to-student interaction in their classes, a committee or workgroup focusing on faculty development could reach out to professors already using similar teaching strategies. The workgroup could work with the faculty member(s) to develop a one-hour professional development opportunity to share their best practices and what they've learned from incorporating the strategies in their classroom.

7. Develop training programs for student support services staff, including the counseling and advising office, faculty, and administrators to better assist students with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities.

Also linked to the theme of on-campus engagement and interactions, this recommendation involves working with the disabilities services coordinator at the college to locate or design materials to share with faculty, student support services staff, and administrators to identify the most common disabilities reported by students attending the college, and sample accommodation plans. Materials could include brief explanatory videos, text-based content, and a digital repository to store and share information. The goal of such a training program or materials would be to encourage all college employees working with students with autism spectrum disorders or other disabilities to meet educational and student service needs without compromising the integrity of the course, institutional processes, or local, state, or federal regulations.

8. Provide more cost transparency.

Find ways to share the cost of attendance with students and have the information readily available. This recommendation is linked to the theme of financial characteristics, particularly addressing the concern about cost sub-theme. Some ideas are to find a way to incorporate the course cost within a student information system when a student registers for the class, make the tuition and fee rates for the year/semester easy to find on the college's website. These are not necessarily things that have to be created, but could be integrated in other areas of cost presentation.

9. Encourage all, or even a greater percentage of traditional-aged students to apply for all the financial aid programs offered through the community college, including federal

(grants, loans if necessary), state (grants), and local (scholarships, fellowships, etc.)

financial aid programs.

Recommendation number 9 is linked to the theme of financial characteristics, specifically the sub-theme of financial aid. There are several ways the college could promote applying for financial aid. As a college, participate in the statewide FAFSA help day, and offer free financial aid workshops focusing on completing the FAFSA and scholarship applications throughout the summer at varying times and campuses to reach the widest audience possible. A second way would be to host 30-minute to 1-hour financial aid information sessions or workshops scheduled during the day and evening that focus on various financial aid topics like federal student loans, work-study opportunities and scholarships. The workshops could include information about and ways to apply for the programs. Additional ways to promote financial aid opportunities at the college could include developing brief videos to answer common questions and sharing them on department social media sites, within student development courses, and part of the new student orientation process, and the college's web site.

10. Promote and make career and program interest assessments readily available to students.

The counseling and advising office should encourage undecided students to complete skill and interest assessments prior to an advising appointment. This recommendation is linked to the undecided theme, and the goal is to help students identify potential career and educational interests. Faculty members teaching the required student development courses could include an assignment requiring students to complete an assessment and identify a program offered at the community college and generate an enrollment plan identifying the additional courses students would need to take to complete the credential requirements.

11. Increase awareness among community college faculty, staff, and administrators that not all students, including the traditional-aged students, have the family supports (physical, mental, and monetary) to encourage persistence.

The goal of recommendation 11 is to help faculty, staff, and administrators develop a better understanding of student needs and experiences in order to develop retention plans, programs, and services. This recommendation is also linked to the theme of family support. One way to increase awareness about the needs and experiences of the student body would be to incorporate feedback from the student government association representatives in college leadership meetings. A second way to generate awareness about the student body would be to work with the office of institutional effectiveness and research to generate a brief informational presentation during the opening convocation programming that includes general descriptors of the institution's students and cultural information about the students similar to Beloit College's Mindset list.

12. Work to build upon students' determination and self-motivation.

The college's counseling and advising and student life offices should work together to develop and host workshops aimed at helping students transition through Arthur W. Chickering's "developing purpose" vector of psychosocial development (Chickering, 1969; Chickering and Reisser, 1993). This vector of psychosocial development is geared toward helping students develop a purpose of their community college attendance, and the decision-making and learning process associated with balancing goals and commitments (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Activities and workshops could focus on topics like time management, mock interview workshops, and career and transfer planning. These topics could also be incorporated in the

required student development course. Recommendation 12 is linked to the emergent theme of determination and self-motivation.

Directions for Future Research

Qualitative studies, particularly those with a student retention and persistence focus, whether at the community college or four-year institution, provide opportunities to identify and explore the experiences and perceptions of enrolled students. As institutions develop strategies, programs, and services aimed at improving student persistence and success rates, opportunities for valuable insights are missed if the student voice is not also present.

For the researched institution, two-thirds of the students (66%) are under age 21, and only 17% of the students are between the ages of 22 and 39 (see Table 1 in Chapter 3). The average student age is 23. According to a recent AACC Fast Facts publication, the average age of community college students enrolled in courses bearing college-level credit is 28. While this is above the age-range for the traditional-aged community college student, it is interesting to note (Fast Facts, 2016). Additionally, nearly half of community college students nationwide are between the ages of 22 and 39, and a little more than one-third of community college students are under the age of 21, indicating a shift from traditional to nontraditional student populations is underway (AACC, 2016). Aligned with these changes to the population of community college students, nationwide, the area of nontraditional student persistence and retention at the community college is ripe for future research.

Another area for future research should include identifying experiences and perceptions of traditional-aged students who have stopped attending. Although this specific direction may be challenging in terms of garnering responses, qualitative research including these students may reveal additional barriers to persistence and retention.

Research designs other than a qualitative, phenomenological study may provide additional data regarding retention and persistence patterns among traditional-aged community college students. A mixed-methods study incorporating both the student voice and quantitative, institutional data could examine and compare traditional-aged that persist and those that stop attending.

The participants in this study had to meet the eligibility criteria of being a traditional-aged student that persisted from one academic year to the next at the community college. The study was not conducted over a long-enough span of time that would help the researcher determine whether the participants graduated or will make it to graduation. Developing more of a longitudinal study to identify and match student perceptions and experiences with persistence rates and success at the community college would also be helpful for faculty, staff, and administrators.

Conclusion

The current study supports and extends what is known about traditional-aged community college students and their continued attendance and persistence decisions. This research added community college students' voices to the abundantly researched student departure, involvement and attrition models developed by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1999), Astin (1984, 1993) and Bean (1980, 1985), respectively.

This chapter began with a brief overview of the problem, revisited the purpose statement and research questions. The chapter continued with a summary of the methodology and data analysis. Major findings of the study were then connected to the existing literature. Further more, implications, recommendations and directions for future research were presented.

A phenomenological, qualitative research design was used to explore traditional-aged student perceptions and experiences associated with persistence at a community college. A literature review including a brief history of the community college, persistence and retention measures, retention and persistence research at four-year institutions and community colleges were used to validate this study's findings. The current study was designed to add the student voice to community college persistence literature by documenting their lived experiences and perceptions that encourage or discourage persistence as traditional-aged community college students.

The data collected from fifteen interviews answered the research questions guiding this study:

RQ1. What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that encourage or discourage persistence?

RQ2. What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that are perceived as barriers while enrolled?

RQ3. What is the lived experience of traditional-aged community college students that are perceived as supports while enrolled?

The interview data generated 7 emergent themes that were categorized and interpreted within the theoretical lens of existing retention and persistence models (Astin, 1985; Bean 1980, 1985; Bers & Smith, 1991; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1999) and this study's three research questions. The seven themes include:

1. Financial characteristics (three sub-themes: concern about cost, financial aid, and working while enrolled).

2. Early anxious thoughts.

3. Undecided education and career plans.

4. Family support.

5. Determination and self-motivation

6. On-campus engagement and interactions (four sub-themes, course experiences, professor interactions, counseling and advising experiences, and college staff interactions).

7. Plans to transfer.

The present study has contributed to the field of community college persistence by providing insight into traditional-aged student perceptions and lived experiences that encouraged or discouraged persistence. The intent of the research was to gain a better understanding of traditional-aged students' experiences that affect their decisions to continue attending at the community college as part of an effort to identify barriers and supports students face while enrolled to improve persistence and retention rates. The present study contributes to the literature by supporting and extending traditional-aged student persistence in community colleges.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER REQUESTING ACCESS TO STUDY SITE

Greetings,

My name is Naomi Simpson. I am a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership program at Old Dominion University. As part of the requirements for my degree, I am seeking permission to interview individuals about their personal experiences and perceptions associated with persistence and retention. Specifically, the study will seek to understand the perceptions and experience that encourage or discourage persistence, perceived barriers to persistence, and perceived supports to persistence.

I am seeking to identify and interview a minimum of 15, traditional-aged, first time in college students attending your institution in my study. As part of the research process, I have completed a Human Subjects Protection course, and the project has gone through the institutional review board process at Old Dominion University. The identity of your institution and each participant will be protected during the study and will not be personally identified in any publication, presentation, or report. Upon request, you will be provided with a copy of the results from the entire study.

Sincerely,

Naomi Simpson
Old Dominion University
Graduate Student

APPENDIX B

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Greetings,

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Naomi Simpson, a student at Old Dominion University (ODU). The study fulfills a part of Naomi Simpson's academic requirements at ODU.

Upon completion of the study, the researcher hopes to better understand traditional-aged students' perceptions and experiences associated with continuing attendance at your college. Specifically, the study will seek to understand what encourages or discourages persistence and perceptions and experiences that are supports or barriers to persistence. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a first-time-in-college student, you are between the ages of 18-24, you attended at least one course at a community college during the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semester, and you have continued your attendance in at least one course in the fall 2015 semester at the same community college.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will agree to participate in a one-on-one interview, and possibly, a follow-up interview. Before the interview, you will be asked to respond to a brief questionnaire and sign an informed consent letter. The questionnaire will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. For the interview, you and Naomi Simpson will meet one time for about 60 minutes and no more than 120 minutes. The interview will be recorded. You will be provided the opportunity and encouraged to review the transcript of your interview for accuracy.

If you are interested in participating, respond to this email and Naomi will contact you. If you participate, your name will be entered into a drawing for a gift card or college sweatshirt.

If you have questions or are interested in participating in this research, please contact Naomi Simpson by cell (540-327-6631 or email (nsimp005@odu.edu).

Thank you for your interest in participating.

Best wishes,

Naomi Simpson
Old Dominion University
Graduate Student

☐   Yes, I would like to participate.

The best way to contact me is:

_____

_____

☐   No, I'm not interested in participating.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

My name is Naomi Simpson. I am a graduate student at Old Dominion University under the direction of Dr. Dana Burnett. I am conducting a study to explore traditional-aged community college students' perceptions and experiences toward persistence. Several studies have been conducted looking into the subject of community college student persistence and retention. None of them have explained what encourages or discourages persistence from the student's perspective.

If you volunteer to participate in this study you will be asked to do the following:
- o Complete a brief, pre-interview questionnaire designed to gather demographic information for the purposes of describing the participants in this study.
- o Participate in a 60-minute, audio-recorded interview about your perceptions, experiences, and views of continuing your attendance at a community college.

This study poses no foreseeable risk to you. You may choose not to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable, and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time, without penalty. The results of this study may be used to improve existing interactions with students and/or develop new support programs for community college students.

The researchers will take reasonable steps to keep private information, such as your name, questionnaire responses, and responses to the interview questions confidential. The researcher will remove personally identifying information from transcripts and utilize pseudonyms to protect your privacy. Additionally, research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. All data from this project will be stored in an encrypted folder on my personal computer, and will be stored in a locked cabinet when not in use for a period of 3-5 years. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations and publications, but the researcher will not identify you.

It is okay for you to say NO. Even if you agree to say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study at any time without suffering a penalty or loss of benefits.

Voluntary Consent
By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are agreeing that you are between the ages of 18-24. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. You are also saying that you agree to participate in this project. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, please contact Naomi Simpson by email (nsimp005@odu.edu) or by cell phone (540-327-6631).

For any questions you may have about your rights or this form, or if any time you feel pressured to participate, then you should call Dr. George Maihafer, the current IRB chair, at 757-683-4520, or the Old Dominion Office of Research at 757-683-3460.

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher will give you a copy of this form for your records.

Subject's Printed Name & Signature   Date

Investigator's Statement
I certify that I have explained to this subject the nature and purpose of this research, including any benefits and risks. I have described the rights and protections offered to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws and promise compliance. I have answered the subject's questions and have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature on this consent form.

Investigator's Printed Name & Signature   Date

APPENDIX D

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questions are designed to collect demographic information and to take less than 15 minutes to complete.

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Race/Ethnicity
4. State of Residency
5. When did you first attend this community college (semester, year)?
6. Are you currently enrolled? (yes, no)
7. How many credits are you taking?
8. Are you receiving financial aid? (no; yes, grants only; yes, grants and loans; yes, loans only)
9. May we contact you for follow-up?
10. How do you wish to be reached? (phone?, email?, other –specify)

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Opening Script: Good morning (afternoon). Thank you for your participation in my research. As a reminder, I am interested in understanding traditional-aged community college students' experiences and perceptions that contribute to their decisions to enroll at a community college and continue their attendance from one year to the next. In this interview I will be asking you a series of questions about your experiences, opinions, and feelings about enrolling as a community college student. This interview will take about sixty minutes. Please be aware that your perspectives and viewpoints are interesting and relevant to this research. To help me focus on what you are saying in the interview, I would like to audio record our conversation. Is that okay with you? BEGIN AUDIO RECORDING

GIVE PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Again, thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. Please take a few minutes to review and sign this consent form. It basically says that you: agree to be interviewed, to be audio recorded, that your personal information will be kept confidential and that you will not be personally identified in any reports or presentations, and that your participation is voluntary and can be stopped by you at any time. Please let me know if you have questions or need me to clarify anything.

GIVE PARTICIPANT PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE
Please take a few minutes to complete the pre-interview questionnaire. Please let me know if you have questions or need me to clarify anything.

BEGIN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions
1. Tell me about your decision to attend community college, what led you here?
2. What were some of the things you considered in your decision to start community college?
3. What was your first semester/first year like?
4. What are some of your responsibilities?
5. Tell me about your decision to continue attending, what is keeping you here?
6. What has been your most heartbreaking setback so far?
7. What has been the scariest or most frustrating experience?
8. Have you thought about stopping your attendance, or quitting your college journey?
9. What is your support system like?
10. What are your interactions like with professors, classmates and other college employees?
11. What is your most memorable college experience?
12. What has been the most rewarding part of your journey?
13. What helps you continue at the community college?
    Potential follow-up questions

    • Tell me a little more about that.

- What made it helpful/difficult?
- Is there anything that has not been covered that you would like to share?

APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT THANK YOU LETTER

Dear participant,

Thank you for your time and participation in my study of community college student experiences and perceptions associated with persistence. The information you have provided in the questionnaire and in the interview have truly been important and relevant to this research.

I am attaching to this message a copy of the interview transcript from (date of interview). Please take few minutes to review the transcript and let me know if there is anything I missed, and that what you were trying to say in your responses to the interview questions is reflected in the interview transcript.

Please let me know by (one week from date of thank you letter) if there are any changes you feel need to be made to the transcript.

If you have questions about this study and your participation, need more information, or want a copy of the final research report, please let me know by phone (540-327-6631) or by email (nsimp005@odu.edu).

Sincerely,

Naomi Simpson
Old Dominion University
Graduate Student