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Exploring the Impact of Classified Staff Interactions on the Student Experience: A Multiple Case Study Approach

Mary Ann Schmitt
Old Dominion University

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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CLASSIFIED STAFF INTERACTIONS ON
THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY APPROACH

by

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Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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November 2011

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CLASSIFIED STAFF INTERACTIONS ON THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY APPROACH

Mary Ann Schmitt
Old Dominion University, 2011
Director: Dr. Mary H. Duggan

This qualitative multiple case study explored front-line classified staff interactions with students as a possible strategy for increasing student success. The study was based on the premise that too few students stay at a community college long enough to achieve their academic goals. Therefore, college leaders must identify new strategies to increase student retention and success. A literature review revealed positive student experiences increase the likelihood of student persistence. Since classified staff members interact with students throughout the college, the author examined their interactions as one potential strategy to increase the likelihood of student success.

The study explored classified staff interactions with students from the staff perspective. The research questions focused on how front-line workers interacted with students, how important the interactions were to the staff members, and what the personnel knew about the students they served. The author collected data using interviews, observations, and focus groups. She then analyzed the data, related the findings to the research questions, and identified emerging trends.

Findings indicated staff interactions with students encompassed a wide range of content and complexity. Participants contributed to the educational process through skill building, encouragement, engagement, and administrative tasks. They promoted the college mission by supporting open access, student success, and institutional excellence.
Respondents reported being satisfied with their roles; however, they expressed concerns with negative student encounters, work conditions, and policy issues. Participants demonstrated student knowledge by identifying shared characteristics, unique traits of special populations, and various barriers to success. They expected students to be respectful and work hard. The five over-arching themes that emerged during data analysis revealed front-line staff members (a) served as a human connection to students in an increasingly technological world, (b) offered students practical strategies for success, (c) provided support to special populations, (d) recognized work conditions affected their interactions, and (e) desired more involvement in policy development.

College leaders can use these findings to enhance classified staff interactions with students by clarifying hiring procedures, improving office policies, and developing training activities. Further research is needed to more fully understand the role of classified staff members in community colleges.
This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Mike Schmitt, in appreciation for all his support, encouragement, inspiration, and love.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I love to read! When I get a new book, I read the back cover, the foreword, and the acknowledgements before I ever start Chapter 1. I want to get to know the book, and the author who wrote it. The acknowledgments help me know the author. They also remind me accomplishments are not achieved in isolation. That is certainly true of this dissertation, one of my greatest personal accomplishments. I had extensive personal, professional, and academic support throughout this journey. Therefore, it is with immense pleasure and sincere gratitude that I acknowledge those who helped me accomplish this work.

Personally, I extend my deepest appreciation to my husband, Mike. When I began this project, I really did not understand how much time, energy, and effort it would take to complete it. Mike remained patient, supportive, and good-humored throughout many months of hearing “almost done,” “getting there,” “not quite” and “into the home stretch.” I know I could not have done it without him. Thank you does not come close to expressing my gratitude. Fortunately, after many years of marriage, I do not think words are necessary anymore. I will be very proud to earn the title, Dr. Schmitt; however, Mrs. Schmitt will always represent that which is most important in my life.

I am also deeply grateful to my children, Matt and Jenny, for their on-going support and encouragement. During this process, I watched them both graduate from college and establish themselves in their own careers. Although they were dealing with many of their own challenges, they always had time to support me. Their contributions were extensive and varied. Matt did everything from helping me move into the dorms
during Summer Institute to providing some much needed stress relief with fantasy football. Jenny saved me many times with her computer skills, kept me nourished with her wonderful home cooking, and did her best to update my professional wardrobe. Both of them listened to me vent, offered suggestions, and helped me keep things in perspective. I am deeply grateful for all they did to help me complete this goal.

My extended family and friends were also exceptionally supportive. Numerous emails, cards, kind words, and gestures sustained me along the way. Although I might not have always responded in kind, I always appreciated the efforts. I know I have not been the best sister, daughter, aunt, cousin, or friend throughout this process. Nevertheless, people put up with me! I truly appreciate all the understanding and patience sent my way.

I also extend my sincere appreciation to Captain Ralph C. Jones, USN and all the dedicated medical professionals at National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda and DeWitt Army Hospital. Their expertise, support, and encouragement were instrumental in enabling me to complete this work. My care at these facilities was consistently outstanding. I have said thank you to many individuals along the way. However, I know my care was a team effort. This acknowledgment is meant to publicly include everyone who contributed to the effort.

My final personal acknowledgement is to my sister, Barbara Boucek. She provided a much needed model of strength and courage during this time. No matter how tired or frustrated I became, I always found inspiration in her example. Her amazing spirit, good humor, and positive outlook are reflected in these pages. I am very grateful
for all she has given me. And, now that this dissertation is complete, I will endeavor to finally beat her at Scrabble!!

I also received outstanding professional support during this process. My colleagues provided consistent words of encouragement, professional insights, and technical expertise. I am especially thankful to Dr. Hortense Hinton, Provost and Dr. Ron Buchanan, Dean, Communications Technology and Social Sciences, at Northern Virginia Community College, Manassas campus. They gave generously of their time and talent to mentor me. I also appreciated the specific contributions of Molly Lynch, Libby Vick, Susannah Givens, Barbara Lash, Mocha Dyrud, Loretta Gray, Claire Ackerman, Frances Cato, and Richard Auckerman. Of course, this project would not have been possible without the research participants. I truly appreciated their time, expertise, and perspectives. To assure confidentiality, I will not name them individually. However, I am very thankful for their willingness to help me understand the important jobs they do.

My time at Old Dominion University (ODU) was a challenging and energizing academic experience. I am especially grateful to Dr. Molly Duggan, my dissertation chairperson, for her ideas, suggestions, corrections, and encouragement. She treated me as a valued colleague rather than a needy student. Her respect for my opinions enabled me to gain the confidence I needed to excel. I also appreciate the time, effort, and feedback provided by Dr. Mitch Williams and Dr. Judy McMillan, my committee members. Their contributions strengthened my study and enhanced my understanding of the topic.

Other members of the ODU community also helped me achieve this goal. Dr. Ted Raspiller, former CCL Director, spent considerable time helping me begin this
journey. Martha Mazeika, former CCL Administrative Assistant, warmly welcomed me to the program and advised our cohort to “just keep swimming.” We adopted her advice as our slogan and I remembered it many times throughout the process. CCL Cohort 6 members, Catherine Songer, Ellen Davenport, Sam Powers, and Megan Healy, along with other fellow doctoral students, provided considerable encouragement along the way. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Catherine Songer for kindnesses too numerous to count. Her strong work ethic, caring personality, unwavering integrity, and wonderful sense of humor were immensely helpful to me. She was “always faithful,” as I would expect.

In closing, I acknowledge the foundation of all my work. My parents, George and Agatha Walz, did not live to see me achieve this goal. Nevertheless, they were certainly with me in spirit during the entire journey. Finally, my faith has sustained me throughout this process and throughout my life. With that in mind, I sincerely say “thank God” I have completed this dissertation!
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Student success is the foundation of a thriving community college. Although individual goals may differ, most students begin post-secondary education with the intention of achieving a specific academic objective. Unfortunately, too few stay in college long enough to accomplish their stated goals. A National Education Longitudinal Study found that 20% of entering students never even completed 10 credits, and only 35% earned a degree, even eight years after their scheduled high school graduation (Bailey, 2005; Morest & Bailey, 2005). Factors such as poor economic conditions, student characteristics, and increased demands for accountability all have a negative impact on retention (Walters & McKay, 2005), with underrepresented students suffering the most risk (Alford, 2000; Byrd & McDonald, 2005; Cunningham, Cardenas, Martinez, & Mason, 2006; Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002; Fike & Fike, 2008; Green, 2007; Morest & Bailey; Walters & McKay). Positive correlates with student retention are categorized according to student demographics, student academic factors, and institutional characteristics (Craig & Ward, 2008).

To maintain thriving institutions, leaders must strategically identify aspects of the student experience that counteract these negative influences and work to increase positive retention factors (Fike & Fike, 2008; Walters & McKay, 2005; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). First, it is essential to understand the student experience involves a variety of interactions inside and outside the classroom. Many of these interactions will be student to student and are beyond the influence of the college. Interactions with college personnel can be influenced by the institution and thus merit attention. Student interactions inside the
classroom are most often between the student and faculty member. Outside the classroom, student interactions are primarily with front-line classified staff members. The influence of these classified staff interactions on the student experience is one potential area that has not been fully researched.

To fully understand an interaction between two people, it is essential to study both members of the interaction. This multiple case study explored student and staff interactions from the staff perspective, focusing on how the actions of the staff member might impact the student experience. The study examined five separate cases of individual workers, within the bounded system of classified staff members at one institution (Creswell, 2003). There is little research that explores the impact of classified staff members on the community college as a whole; there is even less research examining the impact of classified staff members on the student experience. Additionally, the literature does not contain many first-hand accounts of the classified staff experience. This study serves a secondary purpose of providing a forum for this important group of workers to tell their own stories. Findings can be used to enhance classified staff interactions with students through improvements in policies, training, and professional development opportunities.

**Background**

The college experience often begins with an interaction between the student and some member of the college support staff. Personnel in administrative support services might explain the registration process, walk a student through a complicated financial aid form, or simply direct a new learner to the appropriate classroom. These initial interactions could make a difference in whether or not a student has a successful college
experience. Dr. Robert Templin, president of Northern Virginia Community College, knows this from personal experience. He is fond of telling how he was introduced to community colleges as a young man. While waiting for a friend to register, an admissions counselor approached him and asked him if he would also like to register for classes. He did enroll and thus began his long and successful relationship with community colleges (personal communication, February 23, 2009). Research suggests his experience is not unique. According to Roman (2007), admissions officers are critical to the student experience, especially during that crucial first contact.

Staff interactions go beyond the initial introduction to college, however. As students pursue their academic goals, they must repeatedly use the library, register for classes, pay tuition and access various college offices. These actions occur after the initial excitement of college enrollment subsides and the harsh reality of college work becomes apparent. The on-going requirements challenge a student’s commitment to persist in this undertaking. Since each of these requirements involve interaction with college support staff, it is essential to understand how this group of workers can help a student meet that challenge.

Understanding Retention Issues

Low retention statistics represent the disappointment of individuals who did not achieve their educational goals. This alone supports the contention that community college leaders must address retention concerns. There is also a substantial financial impact that results from not completing a degree. According to the 2010 Bureau of Labor Statistics (http://www.bls.gov/emp/emptab7.htm), the median weekly salary was $626.00 for a high school graduate, $767.00 for individuals with an associate’s degree, and
$1,038.00 for graduates with a bachelor’s degree. The cumulative effect of these differences is important for individuals, families, and society (Fike & Fike, 2008). There are also institutional considerations to retention in that the cost of retaining a current student can be less than recruiting a new student (Morest & Bailey, 2005), an important fact in these difficult economic times. However, retention is a complicated issue, and research in this area is lacking at most institutions (Craig & Ward, 2008; Fike & Fike; Morest & Bailey; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Community college leaders must begin to identify specific behaviors at their institution that promote persistence and might ultimately lead to increased retention.

**Institutional considerations.** Although several factors influence whether or not a student persists, experts in retention research claim that institutions do have an important impact on whether or not students remain in college. Tinto (2007) and Bean and Eaton (2002) emphasize the relationship between student characteristics and college interactions and the resulting impact on retention. A lack of positive interactions with faculty, administrators, and staff, generally results in a student’s early departure from the school. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) underscore this point by demonstrating that positive interactions with college members outside the classroom maximize college retention. Astin (2006) explains that output, such as degrees earned, must be understood in relation to input, such as age, gender, or ability. However, input and output are best comprehended in relation to the college environment.

Research at individual institutions found that persistence increases when students attend colleges whose functional environment benefits them (Christman, 2000). Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell (2006) also learned that student skills must be
developed through campus-wide resources. Additional research data reveal two of the main reasons students give for leaving early are a lack of support and negative early experiences (Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2007). This information can provide a foundation for individual institutions to explore how their unique characteristics impact retention of local students (Craig & Ward, 2008; Schuetz, 2005; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). For example, a survey of students at one institution reported that personnel in some campus offices exhibited an attitude that caused students to avoid using that service. The findings also suggested the lack of a “tie” to the college ultimately impacted retention (Customer Service Committee Report, 2008). Although these findings did not prove any causal relationship, both merit further research.

**Student considerations.** Persistence issues affect all students, but, statistics suggest under-represented student populations are impacted more than traditional students. This is especially relevant to community colleges that serve a disproportionate amount of low-income, first-generation college students, students of color, and other traditionally under-represented populations (Fike & Fike; 2008; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). First-generation students have lower completion rates than students with parents who attended college (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Fike & Fike). Completion rates for blacks are also low, with some leaving college almost as soon as they arrive (Alford, 2000; Morest & Bailey, 2005). Similar data are available for Latino students (Cunningham, et al, 2006) and American Indians (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002). These students may understand very little about what it takes to be admitted to college and how to be successful once they are there (Roman, 2007). They often require significant support before ever entering a classroom. Since most college contacts outside the
classroom are with classified staff members, the needed support is likely to come from that group of college personnel.

Community colleges offer open access to post-secondary education as part of their mission (Vaughn, 2006), inviting students from groups that are not traditionally well represented in higher education. Additionally, enrollment growth has brought an increasing number of minority students to the two-year schools (Walters & McKay, 2005). These factors elevate the retention issue for these institutions, making it essential for leaders to find ways to increase program completions. The reasons for lower retention rates vary, but research targeting high risk groups indicates that support from the college (Cox, 2009; Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002) and beneficial environments (Christman, 2000; O’Banion, 1978) help students persist.

The Role of Classified Staff

Support staff account for approximately 40% of all personnel at community colleges (Bauer, 2000). This group of workers goes by many names, but none seem to constitute a generally accepted and preferred title. They are referred to as “classified staff,” “admin,” “secretaries,” and “receptionists.” Sometimes they are just identified according to the work they do: “the financial aid guru,” “the woman at the testing center,” “the library lady,” or “that scheduling person.” Other times their position is distinguished by what they are not, as in they are not part of the professional staff made up of faculty and administrators. The lack of a unifying title is likely due to the wide variety of jobs performed by this important group of workers. Nevertheless, it also contributes to the perception that they are “silent partners” in the education process (White, 2004). Although colleges could not operate without these workers, scant
research suggests that community college support staff receive little attention at the federal, state, or local levels.

The role of classified staff in the research is contradictory. Over the last two decades, colleges have increased support personnel at a faster pace than faculty, at times using improved student outcomes to justify the added costs (Brainard, Fain, & Masterson, 2009). Others report serious personnel issues, such as the absence of even incremental salary increases for classified staff over several years (Hale, 2005). Some researchers acknowledge how much the daily efforts of each staff member contributes to institutional effectiveness (Skolits & Graybeal, 2007), yet studies in this area lack staff perspectives. Administrators seek staff input regarding changes in organizational structure and function (Underwood & Hammonds, 1999); however, the 31% who are asked represent a relatively small part of the total picture. The only consistency found is in the lack of information regarding the classified staff perspective.

There is a similar gap in the literature regarding classified staff interactions and the student experience. McClenney and Waiwaiole (2005), reporting on the best practices in community colleges, acknowledge the value of the interactions by stating that it is imperative to hire the right people who have a genuine interest in the students. Other researchers allude to the general importance of mutually beneficial relationships (Schuetz, 2005), a caring environment (O’Banion, 1978), and student support services (Fike & Fike, 2008). Jalomo (2001) directly recommends campus policy makers institute a multi-faceted approach to retention that utilizes student service personnel in combination with academic and community resources. Existing research suggests these staff members could contribute to the overall goal of student success in community
colleges. Chapter Two contains a more detailed description of all related research. However, a thorough literature review reveals a gap concerning the impact of classified staff.

**Statement of the Problem**

This study is based on the belief that students must stay in college to meet their personal academic goals. Current retention statistics (Morest & Bailey, 2005) indicate that community college students are not persisting at a rate that is consistent with meeting their goals. Walters and McKay (2005) have investigated a wide range of variables that impact this concern. Some variables, such as poor economic conditions, are beyond the immediate control of colleges. Others, such as student characteristics, can be described, but not necessarily changed. Still others, such as increased demands for accountability, have yet to show a direct correlation to the problem. Although extensive retention research exists, there remains a need for additional practical knowledge regarding student retention in community colleges.

The classroom experience is central to student retention; however, it is not the only consideration. The student experience also involves a variety of interactions outside the classroom, from admissions to graduation. The majority of these interactions occur between the student and a classified staff member. Any one of these interactions could make a difference in whether or not a student has a successful college experience. This is especially true for first-generation and other under-represented students who might not be familiar with the inner-workings of a college environment (Fike & Fike, 2008). Nevertheless, very little empirical research has explored this area. Community college
leaders require additional research to better understand the nature of these interactions and identify ways to improve the student experience.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions of key terms apply to this study:

*Classified Staff:* Classified staff refers to college employees who support the mission of the college through non-instructional and non-professional roles. This group of personnel is also referred to as support personnel. These workers are often grouped into categories such as maintenance workers, information technology personnel, administrative assistants, and testing center monitors.

*Community Colleges:* Any institution of higher education that is regionally accredited to award an associate in arts or science as its highest degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Vaughn, 2006).

*Front-line Staff:* Classified staff members who have direct contact with students. Examples include receptionists, library assistants, financial aid advisors, enrollment staff, and admission counselors.

*Institutional Effectiveness:* A term referring to how well an institution achieves its stated mission.

*Organizational Climate:* The perception the various stakeholders have of the organizational structure (Denison, 1996). In this study, the classified staff members are considered the stakeholders.

*Organizational Culture:* The assumptions, values, and beliefs common to a group of people within an organization (Craig, 2004; Gawreluck, 1993; Weidner, 2008).
Professional Staff: College employees who support the mission of the college through teaching or administrative roles. Examples include instructors, professors, deans, and counselors.

Student: An individual enrolled in a course at the college. For purposes of this study, this category includes potential students who are interested in enrolling at the college. It also includes individuals enrolled in transfer courses, remedial education, and workforce development programs.

Student Interactions: Any exchange between the student and a college employee. Interactions may include face to face encounters, telephone conversations, or e-mail correspondence; however, the focus of the study is on face to face encounters.

Student Experience: The sum total of all encounters during college matriculation. These encounters include classroom instruction, peer relations, and interactions with college personnel. The experience might also be influenced by college facilities, course offerings, and institutional policies.

Under-represented Students: Students who belong to a social group who attend college at a lower rate than expected from the national percentage for that group.

Research Questions

The literature review outlined in Chapter Two supports the need for additional research on classified staff interactions with students. Community colleges are able to attract students (Morest & Bailey, 2005); however, many students leave before attaining their educational goals. Although these statistics include all students, research also reveals first generation students and under-represented students are least likely to persist (Fike & Fike, 2008). One possible reason for this is they are least likely to understand
the policies and procedures necessary for college success (Fike & Fike). Since students must interact with classified staff as they navigate the bureaucracy of the college, these interactions merit further study. This multiple case study explored this topic from the classified staff perspective. The following research questions guided the research:

1. How do front-line classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting?
2. How important are interactions with students to front-line classified staff members?
3. What do front-line classified staff members know about the students they serve?

Chapter Three contains a more in-depth discussion of the research questions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore classified staff interactions with students from the perspective of classified staff. In this study, front-line classified staff members were administrative assistants who dealt directly with students. Interactions were defined as any face to face exchange between the staff member and student. The classified staff perspective was defined as how administrative assistants view their role in the educational process, particularly in regards to their interactions with students. By exploring the typical interactions between classified staff and students, the study sought to identify how these exchanges might be used to enhance the student experience. By investigating the perception of classified staff, the research sought to identify inconsistencies between how the classified staff members view their interactions and what they actually do.
The specific goals of the study were to (a) clearly identify how classified staff members interact with students, (b) gain understanding of how classified staff view these interactions, (c) distinguish the best practices among classified staff members when interacting with community college students and, (d) ascertain which procedures seem to inhibit effective interactions. The study also sought to provide classified staff members with an opportunity to express their views on their role in the educational process. The immediate goal of the research was to better understand the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. The ultimate goal was to identify ways to enhance these interactions, thereby improving the student experience.

**Significance**

The significance of the study lies in its potential to increase student success, the foundation of a thriving community college. This multiple case study explored the student and staff relationship from the staff perspective, focusing on how this relationship might enhance the student experience. Community college leaders are increasingly held accountable for student success, primarily measured in graduation and transfer statistics. At the same time, government funding of community colleges is decreasing. Consequently, leaders must find ways to increase student success with existing resources. The influence of classified staff interactions on the student experience is one potential area that has not been fully researched. College administrators can use the findings from this study to enhance these interactions, leading to a more positive student experience. This could potentially lead to greater student persistence and increased student success.

The study is also significant in that it provided an opportunity for classified staff members to explain how they perceive their role in the educational process (Creswell,
Research shows that individuals who are satisfied in their job are more productive and effective (Barnes, 2010; Bates, 2004; Bauer, 2000; McReynolds, 1995). Supervisors can use the findings from this study to increase understanding of front-line staff and make changes to increase staff morale. A more satisfied staff is likely to serve students more effectively. Thus, an increased understanding of these important workers can lead to an overall increase in institutional effectiveness.

**Relationship to Community College Leadership**

Community college leaders are specifically mandated to “provide open access to post-secondary educational programs that lead to stronger, more vital communities” (Vaughn, 2006, p. 3). These goals must be accomplished with a budget limited by dwindling government revenues, the necessity of affordable tuition, and a lack of research funding available at four year institutions. Leaders must recognize these challenges and develop a plan that maximizes the use of all resources in support of the stated mission. Classified staff members are an integral part of this comprehensive approach. This study offers leaders information on classified staff interactions with students that can be used to develop a thorough and inclusive strategy.

Successful leaders must also consider staff development in their overall plan. By giving classified staff members the opportunity to share their expertise, this study recognizes them as valued members of the organization, directly involved in the educational process. Leaders can build on this foundation to encourage individual employee growth. The potential role of classified staff members in student success also suggests community college leaders must be cognizant of that role when administering policies and procedures. This includes establishing appropriate training and professional
development opportunities. Information from this study provides valuable information to appropriately tailor policies and programs.

**Overview of Methodology**

This study followed a qualitative paradigm. The exploratory nature (Patton, 2002) of qualitative research was well-suited for this topic, since there was little information available on the classified staff experience. Researchers consider a qualitative approach essential for tapping into the processes involved with student experiences, especially those involving minority students (Green, 2007). In qualitative research, the researcher ascribes to an inductive process, using information from the specific situations to draw general conclusions. Therefore, a specific theoretical base was not stated at the beginning of the process (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Nevertheless, the research required three essential framework elements: a knowledge claim, a strategy of inquiry, and specific methods of data collection (Creswell, 2003). These elements were used to develop a comprehensive study.

A knowledge claim summarizes the researcher assumptions regarding what will be learned from the study and how it will be learned (Creswell, 2007). This inquiry used social constructivism, the foundation of qualitative research, to describe these assumptions. The strategy of inquiry that guided the general procedures of the study was the multiple case study. This approach involved an in-depth exploration of an issue through cases within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). The in-depth aspect of the case study method elicited details generally not uncovered with quantitative methods (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). This approach used extensive data collection, drawing on multiple information sources (Creswell). The researcher used
interviews, observations, and focus groups for data collection. The multiple perspectives enabled the researcher to examine the student experience while also giving classified staff members an opportunity to tell their story (Bratlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). This also allowed for triangulation of the data (Patton, 2002) and increased the validity of the findings (Bratlinger, et al., 2005; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Patton).

The researcher collected data with locally-developed protocols. She field-tested the interview, observation, and focus group protocols in a pilot study completed in the fall of 2009 (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011). She constructed these protocols by first identifying key indicators from the related literature (Lindstrom, et al., 2007) and then associating those indicators with the research questions. Building on that study, the researcher took an additional step to assure her protocols were complete. She assembled a student focus group, consisting of self-identified student volunteers who have interacted with classified staff at the college. The researcher used data gathered from this focus group to revise the protocols as needed. The researcher also planned to inform the protocols by reviewing job descriptions for classified staff at the central Human Resources office. However, the approving authority at the targeted institution did not approve this measure.

The first step in the data collection was to identify potential participants. The researcher limited participants to staff members who dealt directly with students as identified by review of classified staff job descriptions. She also selected three of the six campuses to represent the college; this increased efficiency and improved management of data collection. The researcher sent an e-mail to each active classified staff member
requesting study participation. Those who accepted the invitation were considered part of the study group. Using a sampling procedure of maximum variation (Creswell, 2007), the researcher selected classified staff members from each of three targeted campuses.

The researcher individually interviewed five of the selected members thrice using a semi-structured interview approach. She began the process with an intake interview focused on establishing rapport with the potential participant and assessing suitability for the study. She then conducted an in-depth interview prior to observing the participant. This purpose of this second interview was to gain an understanding of the classified staff perspective regarding their part in the student experience. Next, the researcher observed the same five classified staff members at their work site using a semi-structured observation protocol. She noted verbal and non-verbal behaviors of both the staff member and the students. The purpose of the observation was to gain first hand perspective of the classified staff experience. The researcher then re-interviewed the staff member to clarify any questions or discrepancies she noted from the earlier interview and observations.

The researcher asked all remaining classified staff members from the study group to participate in a 90 minute focus group. Due to time and distance constraints, she organized separate focus group for each campus. She used snowball and opportunistic sampling techniques to reach the ideal number of six to ten members for each group (Patton, 2002). The researcher followed a semi-structured focus group protocol to gain further knowledge regarding the classified staff perspective. She also used the focus groups responses to triangulate the data. Chapter Three provides a more in-depth discussion of this methodology.
Limitations and Delimitations

The proposed study investigated classified staff interactions at one targeted institution. Although the information can be useful in understanding classified staff interactions in a broad sense, the findings are limited to the studied institution. The sample of classified staff members at the institution was also small compared to the total population. This was necessary in order to conduct an in-depth qualitative study. The findings are limited to the perspectives of that small sample.

The qualitative approach was designed to provide rich details regarding classified staff interactions. However, the design did not allow control of extraneous variables. For example, the fact that the researcher was observing the classified staff member likely changed the behavior of the worker. Although this could not be controlled, it was taken into account during data analysis. Additionally, the researcher could only describe the interactions and the classified staff perspectives. She could not show any cause and effect between the interactions and student success. More research is needed to clarify the extent classified staff interactions impact students, especially in regards to retention and subsequent student success.

Specific decisions within the study created noteworthy delimitations. Study participants were voluntary. This allowed for participation free from coercion and promoted honest responses from the participants. However, it also limited the sample to staff members who were willing to help the institution. This could bias the results toward more positive responses. It might have also revealed behaviors from staff members who tended to be more invested in their jobs. The results were therefore limited to the view of these motivated workers.
This study concentrated on the staff perspective. It is also important to examine this topic from the student perspective. A follow-up study on how students view interactions with classified staff members would enable researchers to better understand this important relationship. Similarly, the perspective of college leaders, particularly supervisors of front-line staff, would add an important dimension to the research. The study was designed to provide an important piece of the retention puzzle. However, that piece did not provide a complete picture.

Finally, the researcher also acknowledges bias. The idea for this research came from an appreciation of the work performed by classified staff members. Subsequent research reinforced her belief in the importance of these workers. The study design guarded against bias by collecting objective data and having all findings triangulated among three data collection methods. The researcher also kept a researcher’s journal to track her own feelings. Additionally, she used a professional researcher to debrief data collection sessions and provide feedback during data analysis. Nevertheless, personal respect for this group of workers was considered in the final evaluation of results.

Conclusion

Retention statistics for community college students indicate too few students are remaining in college long enough to achieve their academic goals (Morest & Bailey, 2005). To maintain thriving institutions, community college leaders must identify strategic interventions to increase student retention. One strategy is to enhance the student experience both inside and outside the classroom. Outside the classroom, the college experience involves a variety of interactions between the student and some member of the college classified staff. These interactions could make a difference in
whether or not a student has a successful college experience. It is, therefore, important to better understand the nature of these interactions from the viewpoint of both the student and the staff member. This study explored these interactions from the staff perspective.

Chapter Two of this dissertation provides an in-depth examination of the existing research related to this study. This chapter begins with a literature review of current retention strategies. The review then considers under-represented student populations, since they have been identified as most likely to benefit from enhanced interactions with classified staff. These student populations include specific minority groups as well as first-generation students from all ethnic backgrounds. The review also takes a detailed look at research dedicated to classified staff in higher education, paying particular attention to those studies that focus on community colleges. The review concludes with communication research relevant to the classified staff interactions with students.

Chapter Three of this dissertation outlines the proposed methodology. This begins with a statement of the goals of the study. The chapter also includes a description of the research design and a more in-depth look at the research questions. The researcher explains her justification for the context of the study, specifically in regards to the researcher-participant relationship. She also further clarifies how participants were selected, why specific data collection methods were chosen, and how she analyzed the data. Finally, the researcher describes the ethical measures she took to protect participants.

The researcher reports her findings in the fourth chapter of the dissertation. She analyzes themes found in the data and presents all information in a clear and comprehensive manner. She includes a discussion of the results, including the limitations
and delimitations of the study in the final chapters of the study. She also offers her conclusions and suggestions for future research. The completed dissertation clarifies how classified staff interactions impact the student experience.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This literature review examines the scholarly research pertaining to the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. The premise of this study is that an exploration of front-line classified staff interactions with students will provide information leading to enhanced interactions and a more positive student experience. This is important since variables related to a positive student experience increase the likelihood a student will stay in school and achieve academic success (Astin, 1975, 1999; Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; McClenney, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). The literature review, therefore, begins with an exploration of retention issues and why they are a concern to community college administrators. As part of the retention overview, the first section also elucidates why specific groups of students are considered at risk for dropping out. Retention information is clearly tied to classified staff interactions with students, the focus of this study. The second section examines specific information about classified staff members. Research on this targeted population helps the reader understand their experiences and better comprehend their perspectives. The final section discusses the communication theory, the foundation for understanding interactions.

An extensive examination of scholarly databases and library catalogs from Old Dominion University and Northern Virginia Community College informed this review. The databases primarily included Academic Search Complete, Dissertations and Theses Full Text, Education Research Complete, ERIC, JStor, Proquest, and SAGE Full-Text Collection. Additional databases provided specific articles recommended from reference
lists or personal communications. Peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertation research, and published books comprised the majority of the literature review. Newspaper articles provided a lay perspective and added currency and relevancy to several topics. Key words used in the literature search primarily included: community colleges, classified staff, retention, engagement, first generation students, under-represented populations, communication, and interactions. Specific keywords focused the review on particular aspects of the study. For example, classified staff research included analysis of literature pertaining to administrative assistants, front-line staff, receptionists, and other possible job titles. Although not the primary focus of this study, the extraneous keywords satiated the literature review. The following pages provide a summary of the findings from the literature.

Understanding Retention Issues at Community Colleges

Understanding retention can be a complicated task. First, the term itself must be defined. Researchers and college administrators use the term to indicate student completion at various levels of academic achievement. For example, retention is sometimes defined simply as the successful completion of a single class or an individual academic goal (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Others describe a retained student as one who attends college in one semester and then returns for additional course work in a different semester (Duggan, 2002; Fike & Fike, 2008). Finally, retention might be defined as the student remaining in college long enough to attain a degree (Astin, 2006; Craig & Ward, 2008). Retention can also be understood in relation to student persistence and student success. The institutional view of retention is distinguished from the student-based perspective of persistence. Similar to retention, a student might persist in an individual
course, a program of study, or toward another specified goal. Persistence in attaining any individual goal would be considered student success (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Student success must be the ultimate focus of any community college initiative. Most often, academic goals are measured in terms of an awarded degree or certificate, or transfer to another institution of higher learning (Craig & Ward, 2008). However, since community college students attend for a variety of reasons (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Fontana, et al., 2006; Herring, 1964; Yang Su, 2007), this study expands the definition to include individual goals defined by the student. Student success can then be considered the amount of value added to the individual’s experience (Jenkins, 2006). Regardless how the individual defines success, each student must stay in school long enough to achieve his or her goal.

To summarize, the objective of the student is to persist long enough to attain a goal. The objective of the institution is to retain the student long enough for that to occur. From both perspectives, student success is the completion of a specific academic goal. Since this study considers what the institution might do to increase student success, the focus is on a potential retention strategy. That is, the focus is on a strategy that will increase the likelihood a student will remain in school long enough to achieve success. To increase student success, leaders must identify strategies to increase retention.

**Retention and Accountability**

Low retention statistics represent the disappointment of individuals who did not achieve their educational goals. The ramifications of these statistics go beyond the individual experience, however. Retention statistics also serve as a measure of institutional effectiveness. Although the validity of this relationship is sometimes
questioned (Dougherty & Hong, 2006) and is often dependent on who is applying the 
measure (Mellow & Heelan, 2008), the use of the construct remains. For this reason, 
retention statistics can impact community college budgets (Goldstein, 2005). The budget 
serves as a form of a contract between the college and the stakeholders who provide the 
funding (Goldstein 2005). Once funding is provided, the institution is held accountable 
for delivering education to the targeted populace. Accountability standards vary; but, 
they are generally determined by some form of retention metric. In these lean economic 
times, federal and state agencies are demanding increased accountability from 
community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Consequently, low retention statistics 
create a serious practical concern for community college leaders to consider. This alone 
supports the need to identify strong retention strategies.

Accountability also reaches beyond budgetary considerations. Community 
colleges create educational opportunities for millions of Americans that influences both 
the state and national economies (Bailey, 2005). Earnings for students who complete an 
associate degree are an estimated 20% to 30% higher than for those individuals with only 
a high school degree (Bailey, 2005; Vaughn, 2006). More specifically, according to the 
2010 Bureau of Labor Statistics data (http://www.bls.gov/emp/emptab7.htm), the median 
weekly salary was $626.00 for a high school graduate, $767.00 for individuals with an 
associate’s degree, and $1,038.00 for graduates with a bachelor’s degree. The substantial 
financial impact that results from not completing a degree has a cumulative effect for 
individuals, families, and ultimately, society (Fike & Fike, 2008). Additionally, the 
increasing demands of today’s global economy require a well-educated citizenry (Bailey, 
2005; Friedman, 2007; Seymour, 2008). This is dependent on students completing
specific programs of study. Enhanced retention strategies, therefore, have the potential to lead to stronger, more vital communities (Vaughn, 2006), as well as to a stronger national economy (Bailey).

**Retention and Open Access**

Community college enrollment has been increasing steadily over the last decade. The 1200 plus community colleges throughout the United States serve tens of thousands of students. This represents more than half of all undergraduates in the country (Waiwaiole & Noonan-Terry, 2008; Bailey, 2005). The mission of these community colleges is “to provide access to postsecondary educational services and programs that lead to stronger, more vital communities” (Vaughn, 2006, p. 3). This mission, shaped by a commitment to open access for all segments of society, enables students with a wide variety of backgrounds to pursue higher education. More specifically, open access promises that “the doors to the community college must never be closed to anyone of suitable age who can learn” (Herring, 1964).

Open access is a cornerstone of the community college philosophy. However, even though community colleges have “egalitarian entry” they must also have a “meritocratic exit” (Karabel, 1972). That is, everyone can be admitted, but only those who work hard will be successful. Unfortunately, community colleges not only hold the highest rate of admission, they also hold the highest rate of non-completion among higher education institutions. As stated in Chapter 1, a National Education Longitudinal Study found that 20% of entering students never even completed 10 credits, and only 35% earned a degree, even eight years after their scheduled high school graduation (Bailey, 2005; Morest & Bailey, 2005; Yang Su, 2007). Ironically, the open access admission
policy that provides community college students the opportunity to attend college might also explain the low completion rate at these schools.

Nevertheless, low completion rates are no reason to abandon the open access policy. High priority must be given to effectively educating the less well prepared student (Astin, 2006). This point was emphasized by Derek Bok, past president of Harvard University, in an interview with US News and World Report magazine. President Bok explained “the college that takes students with modest entering abilities and improves their abilities substantially contributes more than the school than the school that takes very bright students and helps them develop only modestly” (Brush, 2006, p. 28). The challenge, then, is to assure students substantially improve their abilities. Being admitted is simply not enough to accomplish this goal (McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005). Effective community colleges must find ways to retain students long enough to achieve their stated purpose (Jenkins, 2006; Yang Su, 2007). According to George B. Vaughn (2006), former President and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges, there is an ethical obligation to assure enrolled students a reasonable chance at success. Administrators must first identify students at-risk for dropping out, and then develop strategies to support their persistence.

Retention and Student Characteristics

Research indicates that incoming student characteristics account for more than two-thirds of the differences in retention rates among institutions of higher learning (Astin, 2006). The characteristics show both positive (Craig & Ward, 2008) and negative (Walters & McKay, 2005) correlations. A closer examination of each variable indicates community college students are less likely to possess the incoming characteristics that
support college completion (Astin, Bailey, 2005). For example, incoming college students from well-educated families have an increased likelihood of completing (Astin). However, over 45% of community college students are the first in their family to attend college (Bailey; Fike & Fike, 2008; McClennen & Waiwaiole, 2005). Conversely, working while going to school, a common characteristic among community college students (Bailey; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Rolph, 2008), decreases the likelihood that a student will finish a course of study (Astin). This is due, in part, to the number of part-time students served at two-year institutions. Students who must balance family, school, and employment commitments lack the flexibility and time to take a full course load; therefore, they often take longer to graduate (Bailey). This information enables college administrators to identify “at risk” students and build effective retention strategies.

**Under-represented student populations.** Retention of all students is important to community college leaders. However, statistics suggest under-represented student populations are impacted more than traditional students. This is especially relevant to community colleges that serve a disproportionate amount of low-income, first-generation college students, students of color, and other traditionally under-represented populations (Fike & Fike, 2008; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). Data indicate two-year colleges serve approximately half of these populations who attend postsecondary education (Zusman, 2005). Unfortunately, The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), a research instrument used nationally to measure various components of the community college student experience, reveals under-represented college student populations experience an effort-outcome gap in academic achievement
Research also shows first-generation students have a different experience of college than their peers (Pascarella, et al., 2004). Specifically, they have lower completion rates than students with parents who attended college (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Fike & Fike). Since first-generation students include members from all under-represented groups, they are a particularly important population to strategically target.

First generation students. First-generation students are defined as either the first persons from a nuclear family to attend college (Byrd & McDonald, 2005), or be from families in which neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree (Thayer, 2000). They are often children of immigrants or blue collar workers (“Fear of College,” 2009); however, the group includes students from all ethnicities, ages, and socio-economic classes. There is no evidence that they are less academically able to succeed in college, although research does suggest differences in cognitive skills (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). Studies also show they are less academically prepared (Inman & Mayes, 1999). First generation students are more likely to be female and slightly older than the traditional college student (Pascarella, et al.). Although income levels vary within this population, data indicate the majority of first-generation students have more financial responsibilities than the average college student, including more dependent children (Inman & Mayes; Pascarella, et al.). This might be tied to the fact that they are an older group of learners (Pascarella, et al.). First generation students generally take longer to complete their degree programs, generally doing so with less support at home than their more traditional peers (Pascarella, et al.). Research suggests these students have a difficult time persisting at the collegiate level (Thayer, 2000). In fact, more than
one half of all first-generation students who enroll in college never graduate (Rolph, 2008). Community college leaders must take notice of this statistic and find strategies that will increase the level of first-generation student retention.

*Academic considerations.* Although there is no evidence that this group of students is less academically *able* to succeed in college, research does suggest they are generally less academically *prepared* to achieve their goals (Mitchell, 1997; Pratt & Skaggs, 1999; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Interestingly, the actual preparation did not seem as important as the fact that the first-generation students did not *realize* they were equally prepared. More first-generation students than traditional students expressed doubt about the adequacy of their academic background (Pratt & Skaggs). The fact that first generation students tend to be slightly older might also impact this finding (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Pascarella, et al., 2003). Research shows that minimizing the interval between high school graduation and the beginning of college dramatically influences persistence (Craig & Ward, 2008; Strayhorn, 2006). Unfortunately, the fact that first-generation students are generally older than their peers suggests they are more likely to enroll in college after time in the workforce (Pascarella, et al.).

The lack of self-confidence and the separation from an academic environment contribute to another potential area of concern for first-generation students: their ability to navigate through the maze of college. Since the parents of first-generation students are not familiar with college forms and procedures, the over-whelming task of wading through the paperwork is often completed solely by the student (Rolph, 2008). There is no specific data available on the number of students who simply give up before
successfully completing the necessary registration forms, financial aid packages, and placement tests. However, experts do acknowledge the critical role admissions staff members play in setting the stage for a positive college experience (Roman, 2007). Knowledge of the college system and personal support are both important factors in first-generation college success (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Nevertheless, research indicates even persisting first-generation students are not satisfied with their college communications (Townsley, 2004). Community college leaders must realize how essential it is to assist these students in moving through the educational system. Classified staff members are in a unique position to contribute in this way.

*Psychological considerations.* The defining characteristic of first generation students is that they do not have parents who attended college (Byrd & McDonald, 2005). Even though students cannot draw on their parents as a source of information (Rolph, 2008), parental influence still impacts college decisions. Parents of first-generation college students are less likely to be able to explain what is needed to succeed in college as they do not have the personal experience to understand how much time is required for studying and how much of a sacrifice it requires to persist. They might also fail to grasp the financial commitment necessary to complete a degree, including the cost of textbooks, student fees, and other incidentals (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004). Many non-college-educated parents are poorly informed about how to finance an education (Horwedel, 2006). Parents who have not gone to college could also unknowingly offer bad advice to students. They might encourage the student to work more hours than is reasonable for a course load (Davis, 2008), or they may require unrealistic time demands at home. They might also dissuade a student from appropriate course choices, failing to
understand that even accountants must master college-level English (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Front-line classified staff members might be in a unique situation to fill this gap in information.

College leaders must also consider internal factors that impact first-generation learners. One of these factors is the level of self-efficacy, or confidence in their own abilities, experienced by this population. Although first-generation students report a wide range of levels of self-efficacy, overall students with college-educated parents report significantly higher levels of confidence (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Ramos, et al., 2007). Students with high levels of self-efficacy generally believe they can overcome obstacles and therefore exert more effort in the face of challenges. This relates positively to college adjustment and ultimately, college success. Working specifically with first-generation community college students, Majer (2009) found increasing self-efficacy essential in promoting educational gains. Classified staff members have numerous opportunities to potentially increase self-efficacy in this targeted population.

Another internal factor that must be understood is the fear of failure experienced by many first-generation students. Rebecca Cox, Assistant Professor of Education at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, immersed herself in community college campuses to better understand this phenomenon (Cox, 2009; “Fear of College,” 2009). She found many students were almost paralyzed by their anxieties. They concealed deep doubts about their abilities to succeed in a largely unfamiliar and intimidating setting. Unfortunately, how they expressed this fear was often misinterpreted by faculty as being difficult or disinterested (Collier & Morgan, 2008). This suggests that mastering the
unfamiliar territory of college outside the classroom could possibly increase academic success.

One final psychological consideration is to ponder what motivates first-generation students. Motivation is defined as a drive or need that energizes and directs behavior toward a goal (Myers, 2010). Intrinsic motivation refers to those drives that come from within; while extrinsic motivators depend on an outside drive (Myers). For first-generation college students, the goal is some form of academic success. The drives or needs are as individual as the student. Some claim they are simply motivated to do better than their parents. They grew up watching their parents struggle in unsatisfying careers and they vow to not repeat that scenario. Others report they find motivation in improving their own job situation. Another common motivator is a desire to be a positive role model to others (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Although the motivators vary, each drives the student toward the goal of academic success. Research supports the importance of motivation (Strayhorn, 2006), particularly intrinsic motivation in sustaining the academic drive to completion (Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Helping each student identify and develop intrinsic motivation directed at academic success might make the difference in whether that student persists in college. Classified staff members might potentially serve as identifiable role models for first-generation students, providing the necessary motivation to persist.

Finally, it is important to be sensitive to the culture of first-generation students (Quillen, 2009). Breaking new ground can be overwhelming. Many aspects of the college experience that traditional students take for granted can be daunting challenges to a first-generation student. The unfamiliar territory can create doubt and fear within the
student. Understanding these students and being sensitive to their unique needs might be the best strategy possible for increasing retention among this special population. Community college leaders must create a student-centered culture in which first-generation students can flourish (Quillen). This includes providing properly training classified staff to help students comfortably complete all administrative procedures, conveying clear expectations from admissions and enrollment personnel, providing thorough financial aid guidance, and offering assistance in library research (Boulanger, 2009), tutoring, and other academic support areas.

**Hispanic students.** Since first-generation students are a mosaic of diverse backgrounds, it is essential to understand the ethnic cultures that have influenced these students (Jalomo, 2001). This is especially true for Latino students, who traditionally enter the higher education system via a community college (Frias, 2005). A focus on family and an unwillingness to incur debt combine to influence the first-generation Hispanic student. One survey found that 38% of Hispanics believed college costs outweighed the benefits. Most respondents also indicated that they were unwilling to risk debt for a college degree, primarily for fear of jeopardizing the financial security of their family (Horwedel, 2006). Students from this ethnic background might begin to pursue a college degree and then drop out if the costs become prohibitive. Similarly, family ties influence many minority students to only consider colleges close to home. This geographic constraint limits their choices, often making community colleges their only viable option (Inman & Mayes, 1999).

These same cultural ties can also create fear of success in students. The idea of moving into a different social class than their family and friends can simply be
overwhelming (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). This fear, coupled with the fact that almost 15% do not speak English at home (Bailey, 2005), partially explains why roughly 60% of Latino students fail to transfer or earn a degree (Bailey). The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that Hispanic students are often reluctant to seek help (Herrera, 2005), with 31% claiming they have never asked for any assistance (Jenkins, 2009). Unfortunately, when they are willing to seek guidance, community colleges have a low number of resources available to address their particular needs (Frias, 2005).

Targeting the special needs of this population with individual support and mentoring does seem to increase student success, however. For example, Latinos United with Energy, Respect, and Pride (LUCERO), an intense student-focused program initiated at Lansing Community College in Michigan, showed an 80% semester to semester retention rate after just one year (Cunningham, et al., 2006). Additionally, Villareal (2004) found Latino transfer students, who went on to earn a baccalaureate degree, attributed personalized experiences and validation from community college support staff as a contributing factor in their academic success. These studies suggest classified staff members could be a ready human resource to implement intense student-focused programs for Hispanic students.

Black students. Approximately half of all black college-bound students begin postsecondary education at a community college (Zusman, 2005). Student success rates are even lower among black students with almost three out of four our dropping out of college before earning a degree (Bailey, 2005). In addition to sharing many of the same characteristics as mentioned with other under-represented student groups, black commuter students seem particularly subject to alienation and social alienation (Alford,
Retention strategies with black students must focus on helping these students create networks that support a more positive college experience (Alford). Increased options outside the classroom empower marginalized students and enable them to play a more significant role in campus life (Chang, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2005). This, in turn, leads to greater student success. Classified staff members are in a unique position to interact with these students on a different level than faculty and administrators. They provide a potential resource to help students counter social isolation, create networks, and feel empowered to succeed.

**Other under-represented students.** Under-represented student populations share several similar barriers to success. As outlined above, many students from special populations are challenged with a lack of college familiarity, low levels of outside support, and various personal concerns. Additionally, research indicates under-represented students struggle with important academic-related skills, such as technology. Regalado (2010) found female students were less confident with technology, especially in regards to trouble-shooting; while older students were less likely to embrace computer-based applications. Another study of low-income, first-generation, and disabled students included availability and use of computer-lab services as a predictor of student persistence (Abbott, 2004). Increases in technology-based learning suggest this skill is essential to student success. Front-line classified staff can be instrumental in helping students master computer skills.

The varied demographics of the community college student population present numerous other roadblocks to increasing retention. Although under-represented student populations share many challenges, each population, indeed each student, also presents
individual challenges and opportunities. For example, research suggests that American Indian students respond well to programs that serve as "family support systems" within the institution. Further examination reveals the importance of the library as a base for this support (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002). Front-line staff in libraries can use this information to tailor services to this specific group.

Non-traditional aged students, especially women returning to school, provide another example of a unique population. As described above, this group is especially challenged by technology. Additionally, group members are often coming to terms with significant life changes, particularly in regards to their role in the family or in a career. These challenges are magnified when the returning adults are also first-generation students. The transition to college requires personnel to provide both understanding and personal support (Breese & O'Toole, 1995) in an adult nurturing environment (Boulanger, 2009). More specifically, research indicates this group is likely to seek out caring mentors within the institution for encouragement and academic reinforcement (Boulanger). Classified staff could potentially serve in this role.

Individual requirements could be explained for several additional populations; however, that is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these special needs inhibit the ability of students to succeed. Classified staff cannot provide all the support students require. However, they could likely provide assistance in meeting the varied needs of the community college student population. This study seeks to explore the specific ways they currently do this and how that assistance might be enhanced.
Retention and Institutional Characteristics

Results from the CCSSE study provide substantial empirical evidence that engagement matters in terms of student persistence, course completion, credit hour accumulation, grade-point average, and certificate or degree attainment (McClenney, 2007). The data indicate engagement correlates positively with persistence for all students; however, it seems to have a stronger relationship with students who are at high risk for dropping out (Green, Marti, & McClenney, 2008). This link between student engagement and student persistence suggests institutions must develop strong educational practices that support student engagement. (McClenney). Further review of the survey results by McClenney and Marti, (as cited in McClenney) indicates the educational practice with the strongest effects on persistence is support for learners. In this time of increasing accountability and decreasing funding, it is imperative that community college leaders recognize the importance of supporting learners throughout the academic process. It is in this area that classified staff can potentially make the greatest impact.

Positive interactions with college members outside the classroom have long been considered important to retention (Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975). Conversely, a lack of positive interactions with faculty, administrators, and staff, generally results in a student’s early departure from the school. Research data reveal two of the main reasons students give for leaving early are a lack of support and negative early experiences (Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2007). The research provides community college leaders with a clear picture of what is needed to increase student
retention. However, it generally does not tell them how to achieve that goal (Bean & Eaton, 2002).

The decision to stay in college or drop out is ultimately an individual student choice, based on many variables (Bean & Eaton, 2002). Some of these variables, such as family issues or health concerns, are beyond the control of the institution. However, the impact of other characteristics might be minimized with appropriate institutional responses. Institutional policies and practices do impact student retention (Bean & Eaton). Research at individual institutions found that persistence increases when students attend colleges whose functional environment benefits them (Christman, 2000). Thus, student success must be seen as a two-way street. Students must adapt to the institution; however, institutions must find ways to adapt to the student (Schuetz, 2005). Of course, some aspects of the institution cannot adapt. Community colleges are restricted by budgets, facilities, and policies. The successful institution, therefore, must focus on what can change in regards to the student experience. Increasing student engagement through enhanced interactions with classified staff is one potential strategy.

Engagement must occur early and often in order to impact student persistence. Institutions must focus on students from the first moments on campus through their first weeks and months as college students (Jenkins, 2006; McClenney, 2007). The focus cannot be limited to in-classroom experiences, however. Nor can it be confined to structured one-time only activities. Rather, it must be a philosophy that permeates the institution and becomes established at each level of the student experience (Bailey, 2005; Davis, 2008; Fontana, et al., 2006; Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006; Jenkins; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005). The services cannot work independently, either. Even
the best programs will have limited impact if they are not supported by all parts of the college. Students must experience a seamless integration of all services (Jenkins). This information can provide a foundation for individual institutions to explore how their unique characteristics impact retention of local students (Craig & Ward, 2008; Schuetz, 2005; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). However, research indicates that successful approaches demand the active involvement of all personnel, including those classified staff members with direct student contact.

Programs are only productive if they are used. For example, a survey of students at one institution reported that personnel in some campus offices exhibited an attitude that caused students to avoid using that service (Customer Service Committee Report, 2008). This might be due to the fact that some of the same characteristics that make it difficult for a community college student to succeed, also inhibit that student from seeking help (Collier & Morgan, 2008). For this reason, effective community colleges must develop a proactive approach to student engagement (Jenkins, 2006). As noted earlier, it is imperative that colleges find ways to identify “at risk” students and reach out to them before academic problems occur (Jenkins; McClenney, 2007). To establish and maintain this level of outreach, community colleges must find creative ways to maximize the use of personnel (Jenkins) in ways that students can relate. The daily activities of front-line classified staff members can contribute to this goal.

**Summary and Critique**

Retention statistics for community colleges suggest that many students are not staying in college long enough to achieve educational goals. This is problematic for students who want to advance in careers, college administrators who are being held
accountable for student success, and society that requires a skilled workforce. The open access commitment of community colleges attracts a disproportionate number of students who are generally under-represented in higher education. These groups, including low-income, minority, and first-generation students, are most at-risk for dropping out.

Community college leaders cannot control the demographics of the student body, nor can they address the individual problems that create academic problems for students. However, administrators can change aspects of the institution that increase the likelihood of student success. Leaders must identify new strategies to increase this success.

Enhancing classified staff interactions with students is one potential strategy to meet this goal.

The Role of Classified Staff

Classified staff members include all college personnel not serving in professional administrative or faculty positions. Also called support staff (Banks, 2007; Davis, 2008), non-professional staff (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2007) and non-instructional personnel (Duggan, 2008), this group of workers comprise between 25% and 40% of all college workers (Bauer, 2000; Duggan; Huiskamp, 2008; NCES).

Considerable variation exists among the classifications of this group of personnel (Underwood, 1999). However, at two-year public institutions, approximately 6.9% are listed as technical and paraprofessional staff members; 13.9% are in the clerical and administrative areas; 1.0% are skilled craft workers; and 5.8% are maintenance personnel (NCES). The clerical and administrative workers perform a variety of jobs throughout the institution, both in back offices (Banks; Brainard, 2009; Weidner, 2008) and on the front lines of customer service (Banks; Bauer). This study focuses on front-line classified
staff members who deal directly with students, parents, faculty, other staff, and community members (Bauer).

Students interact with classified staff members on a continual basis, from the time they enroll in college until they complete their time at an institution. Many of the interactions are routine encounters, enabling the student to complete the administrative necessities of higher educations. However, college administrators have increasingly expanded the role of classified staff beyond daily student encounters. This is due, in part, to leaders recognizing the vital role these workers perform in a community college. For example, at one community college, support staff now work with high school guidance counselors to track “at risk” students who either never arrive at college or drop out shortly after they enroll (Parry, 2008). This strategy is part of a national movement to increase collaboration between community colleges and high schools. Another strategy involves placing students in learning communities (Weidner 2008; Williams, 2009), consisting of a cohort of other students, faculty, and support staff. In one learning community, support staff members go into each classroom to introduce themselves to students and familiarize them with services. Students in these communities are found to persist at a higher rate than other students (Williams). Budget cuts also drive the use of classified staff in student programs. Data indicate non-faculty classified staff are increasingly being asked to perform duties traditionally assigned to faculty counselors (Martin, 2004). The role of classified staff is changing; however, studies show that these workers must become more aware of the important part they play in the learning process (Weidner).
**Classified Staff and Retention**

Whether classified staff members are interacting with students during daily encounters or in special programs, their interactions with students seem to be important to student success. McClenney and Waiwaiolo (2005), reporting on the best practices in community colleges, acknowledge the value of their interactions by stating that it is imperative to hire the right people who have a genuine interest in the students. Similarly, O'Banion (1978) calls for a caring environment, and Schuetz (2005) points out the importance of mutually beneficial relationships. Students also strongly acknowledge the value of personal interactions, noting that validation contributes to their ability to succeed (Over, 2009). Jalomo (2001) directly recommends campus policy makers institute a multi-faceted approach to retention that utilizes student service personnel in combination with academic and community resources. Existing research suggests these staff members do contribute to the overall goal of student success in community colleges. However, there is no direct evidence that shows how classified staff interactions enhance the student experience.

**Classified staff and campus environment.** Research ties student persistence to campus environments (Christman, 2000; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007), although it does not specifically link classified staff to those environments. Rather, findings state that students persist at campuses where the functional environment benefits them (Christman). The gap in the literature, then, involves how classified staff members contribute to this functional environment. An analysis of the campus environment requires an understanding of the organizational structure of the college, including both the organizational culture and climate (Gizir, 2007). Thus, to understand the
contributions of classified staff to a functional environment, it is essential to consider their organizational culture and their perspective of the campus climate.

The organizational culture includes the assumptions, values, and beliefs common to a group of people within an organization (Craig, 2004; Gawreluck, 1993; Weidner, 2008). While a culture might not be specifically identified, it is a pervasive and persistent aspect of the college (Weidner). The all-encompassing nature suggests it has the potential to impact all members of the organization. At a higher education institution, this would include administrators, faculty, classified staff, and students (Weidner).

Closely related to the organizational culture is organizational climate. In fact, the two terms have been used interchangeably so often, that the distinction is somewhat blurred. A detailed discussion of the differences between the two concepts is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, for purposes of this study, the organizational climate is considered the perspective classified staff members have of the organizational structure (Denison, 1996). Similar to the culture, the organizational climate involves the entire institution (Duggan, 2008).

**Organizational culture.** On a college campus, cultures are generally divided into the dominant managerial culture, the collegial/faculty culture, and the non-academic support staff culture. Each of these cultures plays a distinct role in the daily functioning of the institution (Gawreluck, 1993). The extent to which the culture of each sub-group aligns with the mission and goals of the college is important to the overall success of the institution (Locke, 2005). Thus, it is imperative for college presidents to manage the campus cultures under one unifying vision. Research suggests strong communication and collaborative governing programs are two strategies that contribute to this goal (Rector,
2005). These findings are echoed in research specific to classified staff members (Abbott, 2004; Allen-Mendez, 2003; Hong, 2011).

A unified culture is especially relevant in regards to enacting change on campus (Kezar & Eckel, 2007). If the assumptions, values, and beliefs of each sub-group align with the change, it is likely that members of the sub-group will support that change. Since the ability to implement organizational change is critical to the success of a college (Messer, 2006; Van Wagoner, 2004), it is essential to consider the sub-group influence on that change (Locke). For example, in this study, administrators should consider the influence of classified staff prior to introducing a new retention strategy.

**Organizational climate.** The involvement of classified staff members in institutional change also has an effect on the campus climate. As noted above, campus climate involves the perception of the various stakeholders (Denison, 1996); in this case the classified staff members. Research reveals that perceptions of organizational climate affect the institution in several ways. These impacts include turnover rates (Alexandrov, Babakus, & Yavas, 2007; Barnes, 2010), motivation (Barnes), employee relations (Barnes; Pettitt & Ayers, 2002), and commitment to the institution (Barnes). More specifically, employees with cynical attitudes were less likely to perform work outside their designated duties and were more likely to leave their jobs (Barnes). Conversely, those workers with more positive affectivity were found to be more likely to stay at the college and engage in positive citizenship behavior (Barnes). Employees who have input regarding changes also report being more satisfied with campus climate, particularly the decision-making component, than those who are not consulted (Sigmar, 1988). This
directly relates to the findings on organizational culture regarding the influence of subgroups on change (Locke, 2005).

Specific components of campus climate vary; however, measures of the concept include leadership, motivation, decision-making, rewards, job satisfaction, and communication (McReynolds, 1995). Although this study does not demand a comprehensive study of organizational climate, a closer look at the measures of job satisfaction and communication (McReynolds) are important to examine. Job satisfaction is intricately involved in the overall climate and directly affects job performance. The communication measure refers primarily to employee relations; however, it lends insight into more general patterns of interaction. Both measures show how organizational climate can potentially affect employee interactions with students.

**Classified Staff and Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction is the one measure of organizational culture that seems to have the greatest impact on an institution. Job satisfaction correlates positively with the degree to which an individual identifies with an organization (Edwards, 1998). Satisfied employees are less likely to leave an organization, tend to be more productive, and produce a higher quality of work (Bauer, 2000). Research indicates that in order for employees to be satisfied, they must be engaged and energized (Bates, 2004). They must also feel appreciated, be able to balance work and home-life, have opportunities for personal growth, and perceive a positive work environment (Bauer, 2000). The level of job satisfaction affects all other measures of organizational climate.

A review of existing literature uncovered one study directly related to job satisfaction among classified staff members at community colleges. Hong (2011), using
an on-line survey, explored motivational attributes of this targeted group at nine California institutions. Contributors indicated the work itself was the most significant predictor of job satisfaction, with responsibility for their own or others work adding to their level of satisfaction. Another notable motivator was connectedness to the organization, a measure that included belief in organizational goals and values, as well as personal involvement in the college. The findings also revealed relationship to supervisor and salary had an impact on satisfaction levels, but to a lesser degree.

Although the literature review found only one study directly related to classified job satisfaction in community colleges, research in several other areas suggest topics for consideration. First, leaders must be concerned that administrative procedures and policies send mixed messages to classified staff members regarding their importance to the community college mission. This lack of consistency is evident in three personnel areas considered essential to job satisfaction: staffing, professional development, and governance. In addition to personnel issues, leaders must also consider the amount of emotional labor (Grandey, 2000) put forth by classified staff members. This component of job satisfaction is not as easy to measure or control; however, it does impact the quality of a classified staff member's work. Finally, classified staff must be acknowledged for the important job they do. Concrete rewards are important; however, recognition must be incorporated into all aspects of the community college. A closer look at each of these elements of job satisfaction provides a solid foundation to understand this group of workers.

**Personnel procedures.** Personnel procedures, such as staffing (Brainard, et al., 2008) and salary (Hale, 2005), elucidate the importance administrators place on support
staff. Sadly, these areas are generally not favorable to this group of workers. Similarly, efforts at professional development (Alfano, 1993; Banks, 2007; Huiskamp, 2008; O’Banion, 1978; Reece & Cooper, 1980) for classified staff seem to be less focused than those for faculty or administrators. Finally, research on policy and governance (Christian, 1980; Lanning, 2006; Ourlian, 1998; Underwood & Hammonds, 1999) suggests support staff lack involvement in college policy decisions.

**Staffing.** Community colleges are falling behind their four-year counterparts in student to support personnel ratios (Brainard, et al., 2009). Over the last two decades, four-year colleges have increased support personnel at a faster pace than faculty, at times using improved student outcomes to justify the added costs (Brainard). However, state budget cuts have forced two-year colleges to limit the hiring of classified staff, even during this time of record enrollments (Creech, 2009). Consequently, the numbers of support staff members at community colleges have not kept pace with the number of students that require assistance (Banks, 2007; Yang-su, 2007). This trend elucidates why support staff must carry increased workloads to meet student demand (Creech). Nevertheless, despite the added demand for services, many classified staff members have not received even an incremental salary increase for several years (Hale, 2005). The impact of these personnel decisions must be considered for the worker, as well as for the student requiring assistance.

**Professional development.** Professional development opportunities in community colleges serve to enhance personal growth in personnel (Bauer, 2000; Friesen, 2002), and to maintain the integrity of the institution (Alfano, 1993; Huiskamp, 2008). From the individual perspective, participation in professional development results
in higher levels of worker satisfaction, increased self-esteem, and personal empowerment (Bauer). Trainings generally focus on employee skills specific to the workplace (Bauer; Friesen; Huiskamp). Development programs that concentrate on student needs target diversity training or work with the underprepared student (Alfano). Some theorists suggest staff training should aim to develop the emotional side of employees, promoting the humanistic side of education (O’Banion, 1978). Others stress a team concept in the work environment (Reece & Cooper, 1980). Programs with a more holistic approach are aimed at nurturing innovation and enhancing the experience of both staff and students (Friesen).

From the institutional perspective, professional development opportunities are necessary to assure personnel perform in relation to the college mission, goals, and core values (Friesen). This is especially important now as two-year schools face the challenge of dealing with increased demand on dwindling budgets (Alfano). The varied and changing needs of the community college student body also demand a current and well-trained workforce (Alfano). Nevertheless, even though classified staff members are said to be integral parts of the community college mission, the vast majority of research regarding professional development focuses on faculty and administrators. In fact, under “professional development” in one resource book, the reader is directed to “see faculty in-service training” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). There appears to be little research regarding professional development for classified staff members (Huiskamp, 2008).

**Policy and governance.** College policies must provide a solid foundation for support staff to perform their duties. Staff involvement in formulating these policies is an important aspect of establishing appropriate guidelines and procedures. College leaders
seem to struggle with how to appropriately involve staff in decision-making (Lanning, 2006), however. Research suggests only 31% are asked for input regarding changes in organizational structure and function (Underwood & Hammonds, 1999). Classified staff members have long expressed dissatisfaction with this level of participation (Christian, 1980); yet, reports continue to suggest that staff crave increased involvement (Allen-Mendez, 2003; Ourlian, 1998). This lack of involvement not only frustrates staff, it might be hurting institutional effectiveness. Front-line classified staff members are likely to be in the best position to suggest solutions to critical administrative problems (Lanning).

**Emotional labor.** Emotional labor refers to a concept that acknowledges the necessity of employees to regulate emotions for the sake of the institution (Grandey, 2000). The emotional labor can be considered in two ways: emotional labor demanded by the job and emotional labor put forth by the individual employee (Brotheridge & Grandy, 2002). This labor is considered as important as the physical and cognitive demands of a position (Cote & Miners, 2006; Glomb, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Rotunda, 2004). However, it is often not monetarily compensated for in the same way (Glomb, et al.; Meier, Mastracci, & Wilson, 2006). Although prevalent in many occupations, emotional labor is particularly relevant in sales, managerial, healthcare, and other service occupations (Bhave & Glomb, 2009). Thus, emotional labor is applicable to the job requirements of front-line classified staff (Pugh, 2001).

The daily performance of front-line classified staff require workers to smile even when they do not feel happy; to remain polite, even when the student is being rude; and to be patient, even though a question has been answered many times. Overall, this effort
produces a positive effect for the customer, especially when employees internalize the feelings associated with the expressed emotion (Groth, Henning-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009). However, the impact on the employee is only beginning to be fully understood. The immediate impact may include reduced performance and levels of creativity. Researchers found these consequences in one study of observers witnessing rude behavior (Portath & Erez, 2009). However, the long-term effects are even more disconcerting. Studies reveal strategies involved in regulating emotions for the sake of an institution can be detrimental to an employee, resulting in stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Chau, et al., 2009; Grandey, 2000). These findings must be considered in assessing the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience.

**Recognition.** Classified staff personnel are important members of the organizational structure of a community college. Considered the “backbone” of institutions (Hannah-Jones, 2006), research shows their part in the organizational culture and climate contributes to the success of the institution (Gawreluck, 1993). Increased responsibilities of classified staff indicate an appreciation for their work. Unfortunately, although they are considered integral to the life of the school (Brainard, et al., 2009), their salary, job security, and training do not necessarily correspond to their contributions (Martin, 2004). Their role in the overall educational process is also somewhat overlooked in research. Research with K-12 staff members indicates a lack of recognition is a primary concern to workers and contributes to their perception of differential treatment as compared to professional staff (Allen-Mendez, 2003). This
perception is echoed by community college staff members who consider themselves “silent partners” in the educational process (White, 2004).

As noted in Chapter 1, researchers acknowledge the daily efforts of classified staff members increase institutional effectiveness (Skolits & Graybeal, 2007); yet many studies in this area lack staff perspectives. For example, The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) (http://www.nsse.iub.edu), conducted annually since 2000, has been instrumental in guiding research on the undergraduate student experience, both inside and outside the classroom. In 2002, researchers tailored this survey to target community college students. Community college leaders use primarily quantitative data from The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (http://www.ccsse.org) to identify practices that promote student learning and retention. Subsequent forms of the survey consider these practices from a faculty perspective (The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement [CCFSSE]) and from the view of the first-year student (Survey of Entering Student Engagement [SENSE]). These instruments contain related administrative questions, but none of the surveys specifically considers the classified staff perspective. Similarly, a compilation of essays relating to leadership in community colleges focuses heavily on administration and faculty, with no direct consideration of classified staff as leaders (Wallin, 2010). Recent studies on classified staff perspectives (Weidner, 2008; White, 2004) began to fill this research opening. This study also seeks to increase understanding of this group of community college personnel.

To summarize, research on three critical personnel areas for classified staff reveal significant inconsistencies regarding the treatment of these workers. Although college leaders clearly acknowledge the importance of support staff, the hiring and salary
practices suggest otherwise. Similarly, research on professional development opportunities indicates a lack of focus in promoting growth in their jobs. Limited involvement in college governance suggests a lack of respect for their opinions. In addition to personnel issues, understanding the emotional labor component of front-line classified staff positions is essential. Finally, this group of workers deserves recognition for their contributions to the community college mission. The potential impact on job satisfaction, campus climate, and ultimately institutional effectiveness demands increased attention to these areas.

Summary and Critique

Retention research suggests that student engagement increases the likelihood a student will stay in school. The research also indicates students are likely to persist in a college environment that benefits them. Front-line classified staff members are in a position to impact both of these areas. These support personnel interact with students on a daily basis, creating opportunities to influence the quality of the student experience. Their interactions then contribute to how students experience the campus environment. Although these workers are essential to the success of community colleges, there is little research available on them. Therefore, gaining knowledge about the world of classified staff must be the first step in evaluating their contributions. This knowledge can then provide a solid foundation for examining the interactions between students and these important staff members.

Classified Staff and Student Interactions

The potential impact that classified staff members might have on the student experience, and ultimately on a student’s willingness to persist, can be best understood
through the interactions with students. Indeed, the work of classified staff members in the back offices contributes to the success of students. However, since it is removed from the immediate experience, the perception of the impact is not as easily noticed. Rather, students react to the work of front-line staff members, in both positive and negative ways. These reactions help to create what is referred to as the student experience.

**Face to Face Interactions**

Classified staff interactions with students include any of the myriad ways messages are communicated. Although in our increasingly technological world, information is often exchanged electronically, this study focuses only on face to face communications. Face to face communications with front-line classified staff members permeate the student experience. A typical student will generally begin college by talking to a staff member in the admissions office (Roman, 2007). Student needs will dictate the next encounters. Students might work with an enrollment specialist (Fernandes, 2006; “Shaky Economy,” 2003), talk to a receptionist in the counseling center (Over, 2009; Weidner, 2008), discuss options with a financial aid expert (Horwedel, 2006), or schedule placement exams with testing center monitors (Blett, 2004; Weidner). All students will likely interact with business office staff members and parking personnel (Weidner). Each of these encounters occurs before a student ever enters a classroom or meets a faculty member. Once classes begin, students continue to interact with many of the above-mentioned staff members on a recurring basis. They might work with library staff while researching a class topic (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002; Weidner), student service workers during special events (Banks, 2007; Weidner), or
administrative assistants when making requests of deans and other professional staff (Underwood, 1999; Weidner). The interactions form the structure that supports all academic endeavors, making support staff essential to the workings of any higher education institution (Banks, 2007; Brainard, et al., 2009).

The interactions experienced between classified staff members and students involve communicating messages. It is a two-way experience, with both members of the interaction sending and receiving messages. In face to face communications, the focus of this study, the exchanges have both a verbal and non-verbal component (Myers, 2010). The verbal component includes the content of what is said (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006) while the non-verbal component focuses on how it is said, revealing the emotion behind the words (Myers). The non-verbal component includes gestures, tone of voice, volume, rate of speech, and eye contact (Axtell, 1998; Myers). Non-verbal cues that contribute to communication are also found in clothing, office design, and quality of work (Novinger, 2001). Together, verbal and non-verbal components send a message to the receiver. How that message is perceived is subject to individual interpretation. However, certain patterns of communication are known to elicit more positive or negative responses (Wiskup, 2007). The other half of the communication experience is listening (Goulston, 2010). Listening enables a person to receive the message being sent and gather information to formulate an appropriate response. Assessing all three components of the communication process is essential to understanding the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience.

**Verbal communication.** Much of the research on interpersonal relationships focuses on the non-verbal aspect of communication, as the verbal component is thought
to be more overt and straightforward. Nevertheless, it is essential for classified staff to
attend to the verbal aspect of their interactions. First and foremost, it is essential to be
knowledgeable about the topic at hand (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, &
Fleishman, 2000). Students want the correct information. The value of all other aspects
ofclassified staff interactions with students will be diminished if the staff member is not
knowledgeable about the college policy and procedures. Next, information must be
communicated in a manner that students can understand (Novinger, 2001). This is
especially important in community colleges that serve a diverse population. Use of slang
terms, abbreviations, and college jargon can be confusing and frustrating to an
uninformed student (Novinger). In addition to word choice, clear pronunciation is
essential to interacting with a wide variety of students. Finally, staff members must
communicate with words that convey respect for each student. Use of “please” and
“thank you,” proper titles as requested, and professional terminology are all essential
aspects of communicating appropriately with students (Novinger).

**Non-verbal communication.** The non-verbal component of communication is
also essential to staff interactions with students. Non-verbal communication has the
power to convey affection and attraction (Axtell, 1998; Guerrero & Floyd, 2006; Myers,
2010). It can also signal power, show dominance, suggest disengagement, instigate
conflict, and deceive (Axtell; Guerrero & Floyd). The tendency to non-verbally express
negative messages often occurs when emotions become dominant, especially during
difficult interpersonal encounters (Weeks, 2008). The potential influence non-verbal
behaviors have on communication make them essential to the understanding of classified
staff interactions with students.
**Listening.** Listening should not be a passive process. Rather, effective communication depends on individuals actively listening to one another. Active listening involves specific responses to the person sending a message. These responses may include an acknowledgement that the person is being heard, a paraphrasing of the content of the statement, or an indication that the underlying feeling is understood (Goulston, 2010). Similar to sending messages, listening involves both verbal and non-verbal components (Goulston). Listening to an individual conveys interest, helps people feel valued and understood, and often diffuses emotional situations (Goulston). It is another essential component of the communication process.

Communication theories rely heavily on developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Research on interactions with customers focuses more on providing a service in an efficient and courteous manner. Front-line classified staff members at a community college are in a unique position to use communication toward both ends. That is, while providing courteous customer service, they have the opportunity to establish a supportive relationship with students, thereby enhancing the student experience. An examination of how classified staff members interact with students will potentially assist in achieving that goal.

**Summary and Critique**

Communication consists of two or more individuals sending and receiving messages. This is accomplished through verbal behaviors, non-verbal behaviors, and listening skills. The interactions that result from communicating create an interpersonal relationship between the individuals involved. The quality of that relationship depends on the quality of the communication. Evaluating the interactions between classified staff
members and students can provide information to enhance the quality of those interactions, thereby enhancing the quality of the student experience.

**Conclusion**

Student success is the foundation of a thriving community college. Unfortunately, retention statistics indicate that community college students are not staying in school long enough to succeed. Each non-completion statistic represents the disappointment of an individual who did not achieve his or her educational goal. This alone supports the contention that community college leaders must address retention concerns. However, demands for increased accountability in higher education also pressure administrators to increase measures of student success. These demands come amidst an environment of burgeoning enrollment and shrinking budgets. The situation calls for college leaders to find new retention strategies with existing resources.

Retention research points to the importance of institutional characteristics in encouraging student persistence. Characteristics associated with persistence must permeate the environment, and become integrated into all activities. Classified staff members comprise a significant portion of personnel at community colleges, making them a vital part of this environment. Since front-line classified staff members interact with students on a daily basis, they are an important component of any comprehensive approach. Community college leaders must, therefore, consider classified staff contributions when planning new retention strategies.

Although classified staff members are an integral part of the student experience, the literature review did not uncover any research studies that specifically examined this relationship. Rather, existing research explored concepts related to the general
experience of classified staff members. Studies on personnel issues, emotional labor, and recognition offer increased understanding of these workers. Similarly, communication research offers insights into the overall importance of interactions. These two areas of research combine to form a framework to study the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

The overall goal of this study was to explore classified staff interactions with students from the staff perspective. The specific goals of the study were to (a) clearly identify how classified staff members interact with students, (b) gain understanding of how classified staff view these interactions, (c) distinguish the best practices among classified staff members when interacting with community college students and, (d) ascertain which procedures seem to inhibit effective interactions. Ultimately, the study aimed to identify ways to enhance classified staff interactions that lead to increased student success. The research endeavored to accomplish these goals through a qualitative study that included individual interviews, individual observations, and focus group participation.

The exploratory nature of the study was well suited for a qualitative research design (Patton, 2002). The fundamental focus was student success. This study began with a premise that a positive student experience increases the likelihood of student persistence, which in turn increases the likelihood of student success (Astin, 2006; Bean & Eaton, 2002; Tinto, 2007). Therefore, it was essential to identify aspects of the college that enhance the student experience (Fike & Fike, 2008; Walters & McKay, 2005; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). One potential area was student interactions with college personnel outside the classroom.

This research specifically considered how one group of college personnel, the front-line classified staff, interacts with students. It further explored how those interactions impact the student experience. The focus was on both the process and
content of the interactions. Positive interactions with classified staff could potentially lead to increased student persistence and ultimately, increased student success. Although communication is best understood by examining how both members of the interaction view the experience, this study focused only on the classified staff perspective. Future research will be necessary to address the student perspective. There was scant research available that addressed classified staff interactions. Consequently, it was essential to begin by exploring the issue with an in-depth case study (Creswell, 2003). This elucidated aspects of the interactions that could then be further explored.

This chapter outlines the specifics of the research design and explains the reasoning for this investigative approach. It is divided into ten subheadings. The first two sections provide an overview of the design and the research questions. This is followed by a justification of the context of the study and an explanation of how the researcher established a working relationship with participants in section three. Sections four through six address the design details, including selection of participants, data collection, and data analysis. The seventh and eighth sections focus on the relationship of the exploratory study to this research and the role of the researcher. The ninth section is dedicated to the ethical protection of participants. Finally, section ten concludes the chapter with a summary of the key design points and a reiteration of the purpose.

**Research Design**

The study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to examine how classified staff members perceive the impact of their interactions on the student experience. This approach involved an in-depth exploration of the issue through cases within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). Case study research is distinguished by both
the size and intent of the research (Creswell). The size may include more than one case, layered or nested within the overall case study approach (Patton, 2002). Each case, however, must be focused within a single, unifying system. This study included five cases within the unifying system of classified staff members at one institution. The intent of the case study refers to the singular focus; in this study, the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. When the focus is explored through more than one case, as in the design of this study, it is considered a multiple case study (Creswell). This design employed a multiple case study with the intent of showing more than one perspective on the issue (Creswell).

The exploratory nature (Patton, 2002) of qualitative research is well-suited for this topic, since there is little information available on the classified staff experience. It is also considered essential for tapping into the processes involved with student experiences, especially those involving minority students (Green, 2007). The in-depth aspect of the case study method elicited details generally not uncovered with quantitative methods (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). The multiple perspectives enabled the researcher to compare and contrast the cases during data analysis (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). This approach also allowed the researcher to gather first-hand accounts of how classified staff members experience the impact of their interactions on the student experience (Brat linger, et al., 2005). The perspective of classified staff members added a dimension to the study that is largely missing from other research.

Case study research uses extensive data collection, drawing on multiple information sources (Creswell, 2007). This allows for triangulation of the data (Patton,
2002) and increases the validity and reliability of the findings (Brantlinger, et al., 2005; Lindstrom, et al., 2007; Patton). This study used interviews, observations, and focus groups to collect data. The research questions guided the entire process. Key indicators from the related literature (Lindstrom, et al.), personal observations, and responses from a student focus group informed protocol development. Thematic analysis of the data clarified the complexity of the cases (Creswell).

**Research Questions**

The literature review outlined in Chapter Two supported the need for additional research on classified staff interactions with students. This multiple case study explored the topic from the classified staff perspective using the following research questions to guide the research:

1. How do front-line classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting?

   The first research question investigated how classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting by examining the content and extent of the interactions. Through answers to individual interview and focus group questions, classified staff members described the range of content and complexity involved with student interactions. Observations at various work stations confirmed the validity of these descriptions, and the depth of knowledge required to respond to the student needs. Observational data also noted the process involved when students and staff members interact. The goal of the process exploration was to elucidate which skills were most effective in producing a satisfied student.
2. How important are interactions with students to front-line classified staff members?

The second research question examined staff members' perceptions of the importance of their interactions with students. The purpose of this question was to identify how classified staff members see themselves in relation to students and the overall educational process. Interview and focus group questions explored: (1) how staff members perceive their role in the college mission, (2) how they see individual interactions with students contributing to their role, and (3) how satisfied they are with the quality of their interactions. Observations provided first-hand data on how staff members interact with the students. The goal of this question was to ascertain how staff perceptions impact job satisfaction and interactions with students.

3. What do front-line classified staff members know about the students they serve?

Individual interviews and focus group questions examined what classified staff members know about the populations of students they serve. This third research question also explored how that understanding influences staff expectations of students. Observations were used to detect evidence of staff expectations effecting student interactions. The goal of this question was to identify potential barriers to student interactions from the institutional perspective. However, this question also clarified how students can more easily obtain needed formation from college personnel.

Context of the Study

The study focused on classified staff at a community college. Characteristics of the community college student population make this research particularly applicable to two-
year schools. First, national retention statistics at community colleges indicate a need for significant improvement in this area. As previously stated, a National Education Longitudinal Study found that 20% of entering students never even completed 10 credits, and only 35% earned a degree, even eight years after their scheduled high school graduation (Morest & Bailey, 2005). Although these statistics reflect a failure to retain all groups of students, a disproportionate number of under-represented minority students populate community colleges (Fike & Fike; 2008; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). Included in this group are first-generation college students who often lack guidance in maneuvering the bureaucracy of academia (Roman, 2007). These students require support before ever entering the classroom, a role that classified staff members can potentially fulfill. The study examined how these staff members perceive their ability to contribute in this manner.

**Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants**

The research protocol required full approval and cooperation from all concerned parties. The Darden College of Education’s Human Subjects Research Committee reviewed the research proposal. The proposal included a request for permission to correspond with research participants individually after the initial invitation was accepted. It also clearly explained that all individual responses would be kept confidential and that college personnel would not have access to those responses. The committee granted full approval for the research.

After completing the review process at the sponsoring institution, the researcher sought approval from the Vice President, Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at the targeted community college (see Appendix A). The Vice President
authorized the research to go forward with two changes to the proposal. He did not sanction a review of job descriptions at the Human Resources office. He offered no explanation or alternative for this part of the design. He also specified that the researcher could only observe participants one time. However, he did not stipulate a time constraint for that one observation. The researcher gained approval from the dissertation committee chairperson to proceed within these constraints.

The researcher also sent a courtesy letter to the provosts at each of the respective targeted campuses, requesting permission to conduct research at that site (Appendix B). She then made follow-up phone calls to garner support for the project. Each of the three provosts agreed to host the research at their respective campuses. The researcher clarified appropriate points of contact at each site and explained that she would need minimal administrative support. She promised to send each provost a summary of the final results, with all identifiers removed to maintain confidentiality of participants.

The researcher secured all approvals prior to participant selection and any data collection. Once granted final approval, she sent potential participants an introductory email that was expressly approved by administrators at the central office of the targeted institution (see Appendix C). Supervisors of potential participants also received a copy of the research overview. The initial communication emanated from the provost offices and was sent via the college e-mail system. Subsequent exchanges occurred directly between the researcher and the individual staff members.

Procedures for Establishing Researcher-Participant Relationships

All correspondence with participants emphasized the voluntary nature of participation. Participants did not work directly for the researcher or anyone involved in
the research. The researcher did not use coercion to gain participation and she did not promise any form of monetary or personal compensation. The initial invitation to participate explicitly noted that there would be no work-related benefits. Specifically, participation in this study would have no impact on pay, promotions, vacation time, or compensatory time.

The researcher did allow participants to list involvement in the project as part of the institutional activities included in the year-end review. However, she did not promise that this would enhance the final evaluation. The researcher explained the primary benefit of participation was an opportunity to add to the understanding of the role of classified staff to the student experience. She offered that increased understanding of individual job requirements and contributions could lead to enhanced work conditions or training opportunities. She also noted that participants could include participation in the research as experience on a resume.

**Selection of Participants**

This study focused on classified staff members from a large, urban community college. This targeted institution is part of a state-wide community college system. The college consists of six campuses, all administered from a central location. The campuses use a joint Human Resources Office for hiring all personnel. Classified staff job descriptions emanate from that office and are consistent across campuses. Centralized training familiarizes all staff members with college policies and procedures. Nevertheless, each of the six campuses trains individual employees to be responsive to the unique characteristics of the community served. The researcher will address these differences in the discussion of the findings.
Participants worked at three of the six campuses. Distance between campuses warranted this targeted approach. The specific focus increased efficiency and reduced the cost of data collection. A purposeful, typical-case sampling strategy determined which of the campuses to include in the study (Creswell, 2007). A process of elimination began the purposeful sampling. Participation in the pilot study eliminated one campus from consideration. A limited academic focus and a correspondingly focused student population removed a second campus from consideration. The considerably larger size of a third campus merited the final reduction. Similarities in size, academic offerings, and diversity of student population justified the remaining three campuses as appropriate selections for a typical-case sampling strategy.

The research design proposed identifying the applicant pool through a review of classified job descriptions on file at the central Human Resources office. The Vice President for Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at the targeted institution did not approve this part of the proposal. Therefore, the researcher asked the provosts at each of the three selected campuses for assistance in identifying classified staff members with job duties that involved direct student contact. To assure maximum coverage, each provost allowed the researcher to contact all classified staff at each campus. Additionally, one provost contacted each dean and department head at his campus, requesting a list of classified staff members with direct student contact. The provost then forwarded this list to the researcher.

The provosts granted access to the classified staff members via the campus-wide email distribution list. The administrative assistants to the provosts sent a campus-wide email to all classified staff members at their respective campuses on behalf of the
researcher. The introductory letter contained an explanation of the study and an invitation to participate in the research project (see Appendix C). The administrative assistants directed recipients to respond directly to the researcher. They also forwarded all responses to the researcher that came back to them.

The researcher reviewed each response for potential inclusion in the study. She immediately rejected responders who did not fit the basic criteria for participation: (a) being a classified staff member, and (b) having direct contact with students. She also disallowed one individual who did not work at one of the participating campuses. She replied to each of these individuals, thanking them for their interest (see Appendix D). She also placed their names and contact information on a separate list for possible inclusion in future research.

The researcher sent a second e-mail to staff members who responded favorably to the invitation and did meet the basic criteria for the study. This reply expressed gratitude for their willingness to participate and requested an introductory interview with each respondent (see Appendix E). Although this form email met the needs of most participants, the researcher did exchange individual correspondences to answer specific questions or gather pieces of missing information. She then placed the name of each potential participant on an Excel spreadsheet, divided according to campus. The initial matrix included the staff member’s name, position, supervisor’s name, contact information, and availability. As the research progressed, the researcher added columns to track the participant’s status in the project and the status of all correspondence (see Appendix F).
The researcher met with each potential participant. These individual meetings benefitted both the potential participants and the researcher. The personal exchange afforded the participant an opportunity to more fully understand the research project, thereby making an informed decision regarding participation. The researcher gained first-hand knowledge of the potential participants, facilitating more specific placement in the study. Additionally, meeting at the participant’s place of work contributed to the placement process. While visiting the physical locations, the researcher evaluated the work stations and gauged the feasibility of conducting an observation at that site.

The researcher began the intake interview with a brief personal introduction. She then explained the purpose of the study, outlined procedures, and clarified any relevant ethical issues. She collected basic demographic information, and explored job responsibilities, specifically focusing on level of student interaction. She discussed the extent of participant involvement, including the expected time commitment. After providing a general overview, the researcher allowed time for potential participants to ask questions and express concerns.

The researcher also addressed each participant’s willingness to participate in the study. First, she discussed the reason each participant was interested in being involved in the research. Then, she explicitly asked each individual if they would commit to: (a) the interview and observation process, (b) a focus group, or (c) both. During the entire process, the researcher evaluated the participant’s ability to speak and share ideas (Creswell, 2007). She also noted comments from the potential participants that merited further exploration. The researcher documented all information on a locally-developed Participant Intake Form (see Appendix G). The intake interviews yielded a group of
individuals who were willing to participate in all aspects of the study and a group who were only willing to be part of a focus group.

The study included individual interviews and observations of five staff members from across the three selected campuses. Five participants provided a manageable number of diverse perspectives, affording enough data to identify themes and analyze across cases (Creswell, 2007). The odd number helped clarify discrepancies among divergent viewpoints. First, the researcher assured that potential interviewees had consistent face to face student contact. She then selected individual participants using a sampling procedure of maximum variation (Creswell) based on availability and five defining characteristics: (a) campus, (b) job responsibilities, (c) age, (d) gender, and (e) ethnicity. The researcher did not ask applicants for a specific age. Rather, she estimated ages based on physical appearance and comments made during the intake process.

The researcher sent e-mail invitations for individual interviews to five selected staff members, as shown in Table 1. She also asked this diverse group of participants for permission to observe their interactions during a typical work day; thereby fulfilling the requirements of the second data collection method (see Appendix H). The initial proposal stated that if any of the five participants declined a one-to-one interview, that person would be returned to the participant pool for possible inclusion in the focus group. The researcher would then select an alternate that closely matched the characteristics of the declining member. These alternatives were not necessary, however, as all invited participants agreed to be interviewed and observed.
The researcher and participant agreed upon a mutually acceptable schedule of data collection times and locations (Creswell, 2007). She coordinated availability via individual emails. Once she determined a mutually agreed upon time and place, she sent a confirmation email to the participant with the specified interview information (see Appendix I). Since the meetings took place during the work day, she also sought approval from the staff member’s immediate supervisor (see Appendix J). When relevant, the researcher, contacted the participant, either by phone or via e-mail, to confirm the appointment (see Appendix K). She repeated this procedure one day prior to the scheduled meeting (see Appendix L). The researcher conducted some interviews shortly after making the appointment; in those cases, she did not send follow-up emails. In an effort to establish a relationship with each participant, the researcher amended the form emails to address individual questions, concerns, and situations.
The researcher evaluated the remaining members of the applicant pool for inclusion in a focus group. Ideal focus group candidates included members who could provide valuable information; but, who would be hesitant to talk during an individual interview (Creswell, 2007). Selected members were also willing to cooperate with others in a group setting. The researcher deemed all members of the remaining applicant pool appropriate for focus group participation. She then sent individual e-mail invitations to each potential participant. The invitation included a request for availability within a specified time period (see Appendix M).

The research design proposed that each focus group would stay within the ideal range of six to ten members (Patton, 2002). The design also called for a minimum of one focus group, with the caveat that if the number of eligible participants exceeded the ideal composition, there would be additional groups. Therefore, the number of groups depended on the number of eligible and available participants. Responses to the email and conversations with the potential participants revealed that travel to a different campus for the meeting would be problematic. The targeted institution agreed to allow participants to take part in the research during normal work hours; however, travel to a different campus far exceed the estimated time requested for participation. The researcher did not have a travel fund allotment, and regulations at the targeted institution prohibited the researcher from providing any payment to participants. Due to these limitations, the researcher chose to form separate focus groups at each of the three participating campuses. She obtained permission to amend the research design from the dissertation committee chairperson at the oversight institution.
The decision to form three separate focus groups necessitated changes to the selection process. The initial applicant pool yielded a total of ten willing and available participants. This group was divided into five, three, and two members among the respective campuses. Since none of these numbers met the proposed minimum for an ideal focus group, the researcher sought new applicants. She employed both snowball and opportunistic sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002) to complete the focus groups.

Snowball, or chain, sampling involves identifying potential participants from people who know individuals who could contribute to the study (Creswell, 2007). In turn, those individuals might also identify additional participants. To begin the chain, the researcher asked already-identified study participants to recommend colleagues who could provide rich information (Patton, 2002) regarding classified staff interactions with students. Specifically, the researcher asked for recommendations of staff members with direct student contact. This sampling technique produced an additional five participants, completing the membership for one focus group.

Opportunistic, or emergent, sampling takes advantage of unexpected opportunities that occur during the research process (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). One such opportunity occurred while interviewing one of the original applicants. After completing the interview, the applicant informed the researcher that a colleague asked if she might be considered for the project. The researcher agreed to meet with the colleague, and conducted an unscheduled intake interview. That individual finalized the focus group for the second campus.
Opportunities also include following leads that interested individuals offer to the researcher. Early in the research process, one provost provided a detailed list from his campus of all classified staff with direct student contact. The researcher utilized this list to contact individuals from several different departments. She then sent follow-up emails to any staff member who verbally agreed via phone conversation to participate (see Appendix M). This effort yielded four additional participants, completing a focus group for that campus.

The change in sampling technique is in accordance with accepted qualitative research methodology. One specified design strategy is known as emergent design flexibility (Patton, 2002). This design does not negate the importance of a specific design. Rather, it acknowledges the need for the researcher to be willing to respond to changing situations during the research process. The time and distance restraints of participants in this study necessitated such flexibility.

The researcher determined the day, time, and location of each focus group based on the schedules of consenting participants. Since the times occurred during the work day, the researcher sought approval from the appropriate supervisors (see Appendix N). She then sent each focus group participant an e-mail confirming the date, time, and location of the focus group (see Appendix O). When relevant, the researcher, contacted the participant, either by phone or via e-mail, to re-confirm the appointment (see Appendix P). She repeated this procedure one day prior to the scheduled meeting (see Appendix Q). The researcher did not send reminder emails to individuals who confirmed participation less than one week prior to the meeting.
Data Collection

The researcher collected data during the spring semester of one traditional academic year. The research design proposed a second face to face meeting with selected participants prior to the beginning of data collection. The rationale for this meeting was to give the researcher a chance to review the purpose of the study, clarify procedures, explain relevant ethical issues, and discuss timing and location of the individual interviews. The researcher also wanted to allow the participants ample time to ask questions prior to making a final commitment to the study. Time and distance restraints, as explained previously, necessitated a change to this procedure. Rather, the researcher met these objectives during the original intake interview. She then followed-up with individual written explanations and reminders via e-mail. The researcher accomplished these objectives via phone and email with focus group participants who were not a part of the original applicant pool.

Interviews

The researcher met for a second time with interviewees just prior to the actual interview. She briefly reviewed all information previously discussed. She also reiterated the need to observe their interactions during a typical work day to assure the interviewee was willing to take part in both aspects of data collection. The researcher allowed time for questions throughout the meeting, giving each prospective participant an opportunity to again think about the study and review the release agreement. Each participant stated that all questions had been adequately answered; therefore, the researcher did not have to return at a later time to secure the required release. Each participant signed a written
consent for inclusion in the study (see Appendix R) prior to the beginning of data collection.

The research design called for individual interviews of five classified staff members across three campuses. The multiple perspectives provided a more comprehensive view of the issue. The researcher conducted the interviews at a private, neutral campus room that was quiet and free from distractions (Creswell, 2007). She scheduled the exchange for a mutually agreed upon day and time. Since the time occurred during the work day, the researcher sought approval from the staff member’s immediate supervisor (see Appendix J). She conducted all interviews in areas specified by the interviewee. Two of the rooms were closed and private; the other three interviews were conducted at the interviewee’s work space.

The researcher conducted an in-depth interview with each participant at the beginning of data collection. The semi-structured, open-ended, face to face interview (Creswell, 2007) followed a locally-developed protocol (see Appendix S). The researcher informed the protocol using several methods. First, she conducted an extensive literature review, as outlined in chapter two. Next, she gathered information from a locally-developed customer service survey conducted at her own campus (Customer Service Committee Report, 2008). She then drafted a protocol and field-tested the instrument during a pilot study at the targeted institution (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011). Finally, the researcher conducted three student focus groups (see Appendix T) to gather current student experiences and assure the protocols were complete.

The researcher designed the interview questions to explicitly address the research questions. Table 2 illustrates the focus of each specific question. However, the semi-
structured protocol allowed for changes that reflected an increased understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2007). The open-ended questions enabled the researcher to listen to the participant and more fully explore the topic (Creswell). The researcher also prepared the protocol with standard prompts to be used in the event the interviewee did not have a response to the original question (see Appendix S). As shown in the table, the queries were crafted to elicit a wide-range of responses, rather than zero in on one specific answer. Several of the questions also served a dual purpose.

Table 2

*Relationship of Interview Questions to Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction and Background Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Please tell me your actual job title and then please tell me about your job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. Please tell me about your professional background, including your education and work experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. Please tell me how you decided to work at a community college.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Research Question 1: How do front-line classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting?*

| Q1. Please tell me about your actual job title and please tell me about your job. |
| Q5. What do you like about your job? |
Table 2 Continued

**Research Question 1: How do front-line classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting?**

- Q6. What don’t you like about your job?

- Q9. How confident are you with your ability to perform your daily duties?

- Q10. Tell me about a time when you really thought you helped a student.

- Q11. Tell me about a time when you thought a student did not appreciate your help.

- Q20. Please tell me anything else you would like to add about your interactions with students.

**Research Question 2: How important are interactions with students to front-line classified staff members?**

- Q3. Please tell me how you decided to work at a community college.

- Q4. If someone asked you to explain what it was like working at this campus, what would you tell them?

- Q5. What do you like about your job?

- Q6. What don’t you like about your job?
Table 2 Continued

**Research Question 2: How important are interactions with students to front-line classified staff members?**

Q7. How satisfied are you with your job?

Q8. What contributes to your overall level of satisfaction?

Q9. How confident are you with your ability to perform your daily duties?

Q10. Tell me about a time when you really thought you helped a student.

Q11. Tell me about a time when you thought a student did not appreciate your help.

Q12. Tell me about your most memorable student.

Q13. What part did you play in that story?

Q19. What impact do you think you have on the student experience?

Q20. Please tell me anything else you would like to add about your interactions with students.

**Research Question 3: What do front-line classified staff members know about the students they serve?**

Q14. How would you describe the students you see each day?
Research Question 3: What do front-line classified staff members know about the students they serve?

Q15. What do you expect of students?

Q16. What annoys you most about students?

Q17. How has the student population changed since you started working here?

Q18. What do you think are the biggest challenges for the students with whom you interact?

Conclusion

Q20. That’s all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me?

The face to face approach provided for a full experience of what was being communicated, both verbally and non-verbally. It also allowed for additional probing and clarification of responses (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). There was no time limit on the interview; however, the researcher attempted to complete the interaction in one hour (Patton, 2002). Each of the interviews exceeded the estimated time, averaging closer to ninety minutes to completion. She recorded the interviews using a Panasonic portable tape recording device. She also took copious hand-written notes.
The researcher also conducted one follow-up interview after observations were completed. Prior to the meeting, the researcher provided each interviewee with a transcript of the interview to review for accuracy. She then requested a brief exit interview (see Appendix U). The purpose of this encounter was to clarify any outstanding questions from the data collection. This included contradictions that arose between the interview responses and the observations. The final meeting also provided the researcher an opportunity to express her appreciation to the participant without concern the gratitude would impact responses. In appreciation for the participant’s time and efforts, the researcher presented each interviewee with a small gift at the conclusion of data collection.

**Observations**

To fully understand the complexity of the topic (Patton, 2002), the researcher observed each individual interviewee during a typical work day. Since the observations took place in a public setting, only the classified staff member had to agree to the observation. Students did not interact with classified staff member beyond the boundaries of a public setting, so no student was to sign a release agreement. However, during one observation session, students did speak to the classified staff member in a one to one situation. In those instances, the researcher introduced herself and gained verbal approval from each student before the exchange commenced. The researcher did not record personal information on any individual student.

The researcher assumed the part of a complete observer (Creswell, 2007), using the locally-developed observation checklist (see Appendix V). She selected a position that minimized interference and maximized access to the process. The researcher
initially planned to observe each participant for a minimum of two hours on three separate occasions; however, the targeted institution limited the researcher to one observation. Therefore, the researcher observed each participant for a minimum of six hours during one observation session. In one case, the classified staff member became ill and had to leave work after only two hours. The researcher then returned to that workplace on another day to resume the observation. In two instances, the time limit was extended to fulfill the purpose of the observation (Patton, 2002).

The purpose of the observations was to examine (1) the level of activity experienced by classified staff, (2) the types of student interactions that occurred, and (3) the level of student engagement. The observation checklist (see Appendix V) addressed each of these objectives. The researcher used a note pad and this checklist to record all observations. She noted any unexpected behaviors or activities that were not included on the form. The checklist was designed to describe behaviors and events actually observed (Patton, 2002). However, it also included space for reflective notes where the researcher recorded her own experience and musings regarding the ongoing events (Creswell, 2007). The observations provided insights not possible with interviews alone (Patton).

Immediately after the observation, the researcher reviewed all notes to ensure completeness and understanding. She clarified with the participant any questions that occurred during the observation. The researcher informed the participants that all notes would be placed in a locked file cabinet, accessible only to the researcher. She reminded the participant that she would analyze the data and report all findings in aggregate, ensuring that no identifying information would be included in the final report. She also offered to forward a copy of the final report to the participant. The researcher then
thanked the participant and left the research site (Creswell, 2007). This entire procedure was repeated at all observations.

**Focus Groups**

The researcher met with focus group participants prior to the beginning of each session. She again reviewed the purpose of the research, described the purpose of the focus group, and explained all aspects of the release agreement. She allowed each participant to read the agreement and ask questions. The researcher then gave the participants an opportunity to think about the study and review the release agreement. She asked each participant to sign the release agreement prior to any data collection (see Appendix W).

The researcher conducted the focus groups in a quiet, closed room on each of the three respective campuses. She arrived at the site approximately thirty minutes prior to the scheduled time. Although institutional guidelines prohibited her from paying participants, she did provide drinks and snacks for the group members. The researcher arranged the room, positioned the recording devices, and set out the treats prior to members arriving for the session. Each focus group began promptly at the specified time.

The researcher coordinated a minimum of six cooperative members who were willing to provide valuable information to the focus group (Creswell, 2007). One member was unable to attend the first focus group due to an unexpected work situation; therefore, the group convened with five members. The researcher also commenced the second group with five members when a sixth member did not attend. The researcher was unable to determine the reason for non-attendance. The third focus group did meet
the ideal minimum of six members, despite two committed individuals who were not in attendance. Table 3 illustrates the characteristics of focus group participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Campus A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Testing Center</td>
<td>50-60 yrs.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Library</td>
<td>40-50 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Computer Lab</td>
<td>50-60 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Student Activities</td>
<td>20-30 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Veteran’s Affairs</td>
<td>20-30 yrs.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Campus B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Assistant to Dean</td>
<td>50-60 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assistant to Dean</td>
<td>50-60 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Business Office</td>
<td>20-30 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assistant to Dean</td>
<td>50-60 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Assistant to Provost</td>
<td>30-40 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Campus C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Assistant to Dean</td>
<td>20-30 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student Activities</td>
<td>20-30 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Library</td>
<td>40-50 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Continued

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<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Campus C continued</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Instructional Assistant</td>
<td>50-60 yrs.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Instructional Assistant</td>
<td>50-60 yrs.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Library</td>
<td>60-70 yrs.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher emphasized the importance of respect for each opinion. She explained that each person was encouraged to respond as often as possible. She also reviewed the various techniques used to maximize participation. One technique included a round-robin approach, in which the participants were asked to respond one at a time, moving around the circle. Another approach was to individually ask a participant to reply. The researcher clarified that each person did not have to answer every question. In the case of individual questions, she explained that a participant could simply pass or decline to respond (see Appendix X).

The researcher conducted a semi-structured, open-ended, group interview (Creswell) based on a locally-developed interview guide (see Appendix X). Similar to the interview protocol, the researcher informed the focus group questions based on a literature review, input from student focus groups, comments from a locally-developed institutional survey, and her own observations. The semi-structured approach allowed
the researcher to make changes that reflected an increased understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2007). The open-ended protocol questions enabled the researcher to listen to the participant and more fully explore the topic (Creswell). The researcher also included standard prompts to be used in the event the interviewee did not have a response to the original question.

The purpose of the focus groups was to examine (a) the scope of job requirements expected of classified staff, (b) the types of student interactions that occur, (c) how staff members view their contributions to the student experience, and (d) what classified staff members know about the students they serve. These objectives directly related to the research questions. Table 4 outlines how specific protocol questions addressed each of the research questions. Similar to the interview questions, the queries were crafted to elicit a wide-range of responses, rather than zero in on one specific answer. As seen in the table, several of the questions served dual purposes.

Table 4

_Relationship of Focus Group Questions to Research Questions_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction and Background Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Please state your name, where you work, and how long you have worked here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. What do you consider your main responsibilities at work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. Please tell me why you decided to work at a community college.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 Continued

**Introduction and Background Information**

Q7. Tell me about a time when you thought you really helped a student.

Q8. Tell me about a time when you thought a student really did not appreciate your help.

**Research Question 1: How do front-line classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting?**

Q2. What do you consider your main responsibilities at work?

Q3. On average, how many interactions do you have with students per day?

Q5. What do you like about your job?

Q6. If you had the power to change a part of your job, what would you change?

Q8. Tell me about a time when you thought a student did not appreciate your help.

Q13. What other things can you tell me about your interactions with students?

**Research Question 2: How important are interactions with students to front-line classified staff members?**

Q2. What do you consider your main responsibilities at work?

Q4. Please tell me why you decided to work at a community college.
Research Question 2: How important are interactions with students to front-line classified staff members?

Q5. What do you like about your job?

Q6. If you had the power to change a part of your job, what would you change?

Q7. Tell me about a time when you thought you really helped a student.

Q8. Tell me about the most memorable student you remember. What part did you play in that story?

Q13. What other things can you tell me about your interactions with students?

Research Question 3: What do front-line classified staff members know about the students they serve?

Q10. How would you describe the current student population?

Q11. How have students changed since you began working here?

Q12. What do you think are the biggest challenges for students with whom you interact?

Q13. What other things can you tell me about your interactions with students?
Conclusion

Q14. That's all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me?

The researcher used the protocol to keep the group focused; however, she allowed room for individual perspectives to emerge (Patton, 2002). There was no attempt to find consensus or to problem-solve (Patton). This approach enabled the researcher to assess how much consensus there was among staff members and identify areas of differences. Although the researcher did not adhere to a strict time limit, she attempted to complete the interaction in ninety minutes. She recorded all focus group responses using a Sony IC Recorder as the primary recording device. She also used a Panasonic tape recorder to back up the primary recording. Finally, she took copious hand-written notes.

At the conclusion of the focus group, the researcher thanked the members for their participation and reminded them of their agreement to keep the conversation confidential. The researcher explained that she would transcribe the data and contact each member if there was a need to clarify a statement for accuracy. She assured participants that all notes, recordings, and transcriptions would be placed in a locked file cabinet, accessible only to the researcher. She offered to provide a copy of the final report to any interested participant. The researcher concluded the session by saying good-bye to the participants and then returning the room to proper order. She immediately reviewed the written notes and recorded post-interview reflections in the margins.
Data Analysis

Data analysis began at the conclusion of each data collection session as the researcher reflected on the rich details of the experience. The researcher was trained as a clinician, with experience in behavior assessment. She drew on this expertise to understand the process during the interviews and observations. She recorded her own thoughts on the protocols during the data collection process, as well as in a notebook immediately following the experience. The analysis began to emerge throughout the process of data collection as the researcher reviewed her notes, considered unanticipated results, and adjusted the research inquiry accordingly (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). She used these reflections during the coding process.

The researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim, personally listening to each individual recording. She painstakingly recorded each utterance, including hesitations, laughter, and half-thoughts. Bold ink indicated researcher verbalizations; normal font recorded the interviewee’s responses. She noted any indistinguishable comments and half-sentences. The researcher forwarded a copy of the transcription to the interviewee and requested an accuracy check (see Appendix U).

The focus group transcriptions proved more challenging. The researcher used the same approach for the focus group transcriptions, noting her own words in bold and the participant responses in normal font. However, to assure confidentiality, she did not identify the speaker for each response. Rather, she started a new paragraph for each new thought from a participant. She recorded the primary speaker in normal font and used italics to record an interruption from another group member. In cases where more than
one participant joined in a discussion, the researcher also underlined italicized comments, giving three different looks to a group of verbal responses. Due to the larger recording area and variations in voice tone, some comments from participants were inaudible. In those cases, the researcher relied on her written notes to complete the transcription. She noted all paraphrasing in the transcription.

During transcription, the researcher recorded her reflections of the data. She noted non-verbal behavior, such as voice tone, to capture the participant’s emotion. She paid particular attention to discrepancies between verbal comments and the corresponding non-verbal behavior. She also underscored especially poignant quotes that characterized a point. Whenever necessary, she highlighted areas that needed further clarification.

The researcher ascribed to the belief that her primary responsibility was to do justice to each individual case (Patton, 2002). First, she coded each transcription independently. She read each response and developed descriptive codes as the process evolved. The codes followed a hierarchy, beginning with a large general category then subdividing those categories into related groups (Creswell, 2003). For example, one category considered the types of persistence barriers that classified staff address. The general category was coded PB for persistence barriers. That category was then subdivided into FC (financial concerns), AC (academic concerns), and PC (personal concerns). The subdivisions were further subdivided into FC-A for (financial concerns – aid) or FC-J (financial concerns – job). The extent of the coding depended on the specificity of the responses. The researcher compiled an alphabetical list of all codes for easy reference.
After coding each interview, the researcher compared each question of each interview, grouping responses by code. That is, question one of interview one was compared to question one of interview two, and so on. A similar process was used for the observation protocols. The researcher compared the observed setting, the number and content of interactions, and notes on verbal and non-verbal behaviors across cases. For example, she first compared the setting in case one to the setting in case two; she then compared the number of interactions from case one and case two, and considered how the numbers might relate to the setting. She repeated this process for each of the five settings. The focus group responses were treated in a comparable manner. Each individual response for each question was compared to the other individual responses. The researcher then coded each response and compared focus group codes to those found during the individual interviews and observations. After all protocols were coded and compared, the researcher organized all data into categories, labeled to identify connecting ideas. The categories reflected the over-arching themes. She then related the themes to the initial research questions.

**Role of Researcher**

The researcher committed to obtaining unbiased data to answer the stated research questions. She strictly adhered to the approved research methodology, using the published protocols (see Appendices S, V, and X) for the three data collection methods. This triangulation helped eliminate bias that might result from relying exclusively on any one source. At the beginning of each session, she briefly reviewed the purpose of the study, the procedures, and the terms of the release agreement. She emphasized that all information would be kept strictly confidential (Creswell, 2007). The researcher
specifically asked focus group participants to keep all discussions within the confines of the group; however, she explained confidentiality among participants cannot be assured (Patton, 2002). The researcher also reminded participants they could withdraw from the study at any time, with no negative repercussions.

The researcher conducted two interviews and all focus groups in a private, neutral campus room that was quiet and free from distractions (Creswell, 2007). However, three of the interviewees preferred to stay at their work stations for the interviews. The researcher respected these preferences. The work-site meetings took place at quiet times of the day, which minimized distractions. The researcher noted the limitations of the venue for discussion in the findings.

The researcher allowed participants to answer each interview question without interruption, actively avoiding any attempt to bias a response. At the conclusion of each response, she paraphrased the answer to assure accuracy and understanding. The researcher responded to questions and personal stories as appropriate. She shared some of her own experiences in an effort to establish rapport with the interviewee. However, she kept self-disclosure to a minimum.

The researcher conducted observations at the participant’s work site. During these sessions, the researcher assumed the part of a complete observer (Creswell). She introduced herself to office supervisors and staff members and briefly explained the reason for her presence. After establishing rapport, she selected a position that minimized interference with office activities, and maximized visual and auditory access to the process. Once situated, she sketched a drawing of the office, noting her placement. When possible, the researcher moved positions at least once during the session to obtain a
different perspective, noting this change on the original sketch. She separately noted her own thoughts, observations, and reflections during the process.

The researcher adhered to strict ethical standards throughout the entire project. She analyzed all data according to acceptable qualitative methods. She reported all findings regardless of what the data revealed. The researcher also committed to accurately representing the perspectives of the classified staff members. As previously stated, she ascribed to the belief that her primary responsibility was to do justice to each individual case (Patton, 2002).

**Ethical Protection of Participants**

Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher informed the participant of the purpose of the study, along with the proposed procedures. She explained that all responses would be kept strictly confidential. She also clarified that participants have the right to withdraw participation from the study at any time, with no negative repercussions. The researcher assured that each participant had an opportunity to review the guidelines in writing. She then obtained written consent from the participant (see Appendices R and W) before commencing with the data collection.

After the study, the researcher transcribed the recorded responses and forwarded a copy of the transcription to the staff participant (see Appendix U) for an accuracy check (Patton, 2002). She kept all notes, transcripts, and recordings in a locked file cabinet or in a password-protected electronic file, accessible only to the researcher. The researcher also kept transcripts separate from voice recordings to prohibit any unintentional matching of voice and paper comments. She removed any names or identifying
characteristics in the responses. She repeated this entire procedure for all data collection sessions.

The researcher analyzed the data and reported all findings in aggregate, ensuring that no identifying information was included in the final report. This included information that might identify the targeted institution, any employee, or any student. She did not share individual responses with anyone, including supervisors or other employees of the targeted institution. The researcher assured this provision was communicated to all involved parties prior to the beginning of data collection (see Appendices B and J). The researcher confirmed this policy with the Office of Institutional Research (see Appendix A) to assure support should any questions or concerns arise from enforcement.

The researcher also followed strict ethical guidelines in developing the instruments for the study. She crafted all questions, without use of any known existing materials. Some inquiries emanated from review of existing data gathered from a locally-developed survey (Customer Service Committee Report, 2008). Campus administrators distributed the findings publically to the community college’s employees. The findings contained no identifying information regarding individual students or classified staff. Other questions originated from personal observations that occurred in public settings. The researcher conducted a pilot study using the original protocols (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011). She followed the same strict ethical guidelines in that study as is outlined here.

The researcher further informed the piloted protocols with comments gathered during three student focus groups. She recruited students for the focus groups from an introductory research methods class, a developmental English class, and an extra-
curricular psychology club. All students were voluntary participants who were not offered any compensation for their time or comments. The researcher kept all student comments strictly confidential and asked the focus group members to follow the same standard of confidentiality. The researcher obtained appropriate release agreements (see Appendix Y) from all student participants prior to conducting the focus groups. She crafted questions aimed at eliciting stories of general experiences with classified staff members (see Appendix T). She did not record the sessions; rather, she relied on written notes to document the comments. The researcher kept all student focus group responses in locked file cabinets. She did not use any identifying student information in any part of this research.

Finally, the researcher planned to review job descriptions at the Human Resource Office of the targeted institution. This information was public knowledge and not tied to any specific employee. Nevertheless, she did not receive permission for this review. Therefore, the researcher relied on self-reports to determine job responsibilities. As with all other data, she excluded any identifying information in all notes or written reports. This caution extended to both the employee and the targeted campus.

**Conclusion**

The exploratory nature of this study demanded a qualitative research design. The multiple case study approach enabled the researcher to conduct an in-depth exploration of classified staff interactions with students. The individual interviews and focus groups permitted classified staff members to describe their experience in their own words. This allowed for an unfiltered view of the classified staff perspective, while also giving voice to this under-represented group of workers. The observations afforded an opportunity to
view the interactions as they occurred. This first-hand data was then used to triangulate the reports gathered from the interviews and focus groups. Information derived from this study can assist community college leaders in enhancing the interactions between classified staff members and students. In this way, the findings might improve the student experience, leading to increased student persistence, and ultimately, increased student success.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore classified staff interactions with students from the perspective of classified staff. By examining the typical interactions between classified staff and students, this study sought to identify how these exchanges might be used to enhance the student experience. By investigating the perspectives of classified staff, the research sought to identify inconsistencies between how classified staff members view their interactions and what they actually do. Ultimately, the study aimed to identify ways to enhance classified staff interactions that lead to increased student success. Chapter II revealed a gap in the literature that supported a need for this study. The researcher provided a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis in Chapter III. Chapter IV reveals the results of those efforts.

This chapter begins with a summary of findings from data collection and analysis. This section reminds readers of the methodology and includes information gleaned from the process. It provides a frame of reference to evaluate and replicate the work. A summary of participant background information follows this review. The researcher then presents the findings associated with each research question. Next, she delineates the overarching themes that emerged from the data. Chapter IV concludes with a synopsis of the findings and an invitation to discuss the results in Chapter V. Although the researcher employed a multiple case study design for this study, she reported all findings in aggregate to assure confidentiality. This approach protected the identity of individuals, in accordance with the release agreement approved by the review boards and signed by each participant.
Findings from the Data Collection and Analysis Process

Three research questions guided this qualitative multiple case study. The first research question examined how front-line classified staff members interacted with students in a face to face setting. The second question explored how important interactions with students were to the staff members. Finally, the third question investigated what front-line workers know about the students they serve. Individual interviews, observations, and focus groups comprised the data collection methods. The researcher separately analyzed data from each method, and then compared responses across the three units. She concluded the analysis by relating her findings to the research questions.

Data Collection

Data collection spanned seven calendar months, from January to July, 2011. The first month of the study involved gaining research approval at the targeted institution and access to potential participants on specific campuses within the college. Recruitment and selection of participants comprised the work for the next six weeks. The researcher conducted individual interviews during the next two months. Observations and focus groups followed the interviews, with some overlap occurring among the timelines for the three methods. She completed the bulk of data collection by the end of the academic year in May. Final follow-up interviews concluded the research by mid-July.

Initial requests for participation (see Appendix C) elicited a variety of responses. Reply time to the email ranged from several minutes after the initial transmission to several weeks later. Replies from two of the three campuses came soon after sending the first letter, with little to no follow-up activity. This included replies to subsequent
requests. Responses from the third campus stretched over several weeks, with a second wave of replies occurring after a repeated request.

Responses to the introductory email were not necessarily in accordance with the request. Despite an explicit appeal for front-line classified staff participants, the researcher received positive replies from several full and part-time faculty members. Similarly, the letter specified a need for personnel at specific campuses. Nevertheless, responses came in from staff members at non-targeted campuses. The researcher politely declined each offer with an individual email explaining the reason for not accepting the willing employee.

The content of the responses varied in both length and content. Positive replies ranged from a short sentence stating a willingness to participate to several paragraphs of information about personal interest in the study. Questions in the reply emails focused primarily on administrative concerns, although some respondents did ask specific project questions. Several potential participants answered the request for availability and supervisor contact information; however, most did not note these details. The assorted responses necessitated individual replies in lieu of the proposed form emails.

Data collection proceeded as described in Chapter III. Individual interviews, using the approved interview protocol (see Appendix S), lasted an average of 90 minutes each, totaling seven and one half hours. The researcher also visited each interviewee for an intake consultation prior to selection and a follow-up meeting after completing both the formal interview and observation. The combined sessions averaged 45 minutes each, bringing the total interviewee contact time to approximately 11 hours. The researcher observed each interviewee for approximately six and one half hours each. Four of the
five observations took place during one session; the fifth observation occurred over two sessions due to sudden illness of the participant. Total observation time equaled approximately 32.5 hours. Each focus group exceeded the estimated 90 minutes, for a total of approximately six hours. Based on these totals, the researcher actively collected data for 48.5 hours.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher personally transcribed each interview protocol over an intensive three week period. The individual interviews yielded 72 single-spaced pages. These transcriptions ranged from 11 pages to 19 pages in length. Focus group transcriptions provided an additional 54 pages of data. The observation protocols totaled 50 handwritten pages of notes. These pages included sketches of offices and tally tables of staff to student interactions. As noted in Chapter III, all data were analyzed separately, and then in relation to other data collection methods.

The researcher hand-coded each transcript using a locally-developed coding system, as described in Chapter III. She utilized five primary codes, dividing those major groupings into 15 sub-groups. Nine sub-groups required further delineation, with two of the third-order divisions needing one final dissection. The various groupings produced a total of 40 separate codes. After assigning specific codes to each relevant comment, the researcher sorted each response by code. She then grouped similar comments within each code, specifically noting the most frequent ideas as well as those that stood alone. This process yielded 26 handwritten pages of notes. The groupings enabled the researcher to identify trends within the data. Common codes among the three methods, especially in relation to the same question, provided triangulation of the data.
The researcher related the groupings of coded responses to the research questions. She then analyzed the relevance of information that did not directly relate to the research questions. Specific groupings shed light on the background of the participants, providing a framework to understand the results. Unexpected themes emerged from other combinations of data. The entire coding process occurred over a concentrated two-week period. Results from the analysis comprise the remainder of this chapter.

**Background of Participants**

Chapter III listed the basic demographic differences of research participants. Seventeen females and four males comprised the study group. There were 14 Caucasian staff members, five African American participants, and two Hispanic contributors. The ages ranged from mid-20s to late 70s, with an even distribution of ages between the two extremes. The group represented nine different classified positions across 18 different offices. Only two individuals shared all variables. That is, two participants who worked in the same office were female, Caucasian, administrative assistants in their mid-to-late 40s. All other participant profiles differed by at least one variable. These differences provided maximum variation among the front-line classified staff sample, in accordance with the original proposal.

Contact with the individuals revealed personal characteristics and background experiences not apparent in the general profile. The researcher considered two of the individual interviewees as outgoing and talkative; the remaining three presented a quieter and more reserved demeanor. She noted similar contrasts in the focus groups. One participant emerged as the dominant contributor in each of the three group sessions. Each group also had one participant who appeared hesitant to speak. The researcher
assessed the contributions from the remaining group members as moderate in both frequency and length of utterance. Reflection after each session suggested that the more outgoing participants included large amounts of information that strayed from the original point. Comments from the quieter members were fewer in number and more specific to the question asked. Participants with both communication styles offered relevant and insightful remarks. The researcher considered these differences as she observed interactions and analyzed transcribed comments.

**Education and Experience**

Findings elucidated a wide-range of academic preparation and professional experience. Participants possessed diverse educational backgrounds with respect to degree attained and major fields of study. They also held varied jobs prior to joining the community college staff. The majority of contributors currently served in positions unrelated to their backgrounds. Nevertheless, two-thirds of workers remained at the school for most of their careers.

**Education.** The education level of the participants varied from associates to masters degrees. Nine members attained associates as their first degree, with six completing their early college work at the targeted institution. Business, information technology, and arts dominated the chosen disciplines of the ten contributors with bachelor degrees. Three staff members earned their masters, with degrees in Adult Education, Educational Psychology, and Information Management. An additional three participants are currently in the process of completing their master’s degrees. Three members were also fluent in a second language: Spanish, French, and Arabic.
Experience. The 21 participants represented a collective 203 years of experience at the targeted institution. The four newest staff members worked at the college between one and two years. Two-thirds of the participants ranged in service between three and 18 years. The three most senior contributors had earned their 30 year pins, with the longest serving member just past the 33 year mark. Regardless of age or length of service, none of the older staff members had any plans for an imminent retirement. As one participant explained, when her husband asks her when she is going to retire, she tells him, "Well, I don’t know – I like what I’m doing and I can still do it, so let me get to work."

The reported years of service included total time working at the institution. Nine members held other positions within the college; three served at multiple campuses. The previous jobs were primarily other classified positions, ranging from a part-time tutor to full-time advisor. However, three participants also taught classes as adjunct instructors. Many participants continue to work in more than one capacity within the college, often covering shifts for absent workers or assisting other departments during peak times. Responses to the research questions reflected their entire experience at this institution.

The research participants also brought a wide-range of previous professional experience to the college. Four staff members had previous teaching experience and three others reported working in other educational capacities, as librarians, counselors, and admissions personnel. They worked with students from kindergarten to four-year colleges. Beyond the education field, several members held previous business positions, including hospital administrative work, management, grant development, and advertising. Others worked in the Information Technology sector, at computer companies, or in software engineering and design. Three participating classified staff members worked for
government agencies: one interned on Capitol Hill, another was an award-winning contributor at the CIA, and one proudly served in the United States Marine Corps. Finally, one member brought the unique perspective of the religious life to the study, with her past experience as a Roman Catholic nun.

Attraction to Community College

Despite diverse levels of education and professional experiences, each participant chose to work at a community college. They reported various reasons for these choices, basing employment on functional as well as more philosophical concerns. Practical considerations focused on monetary and lifestyle concerns. However, more philosophical considerations dominated both the individual interviews and focus group responses. These included concern for helping others and an appreciation for the educational environment.

Practical considerations. The practical decisions centered primarily on convenience. One participant explained that she applied and accepted the position because there was an advertised opening and she needed the job. Another worker echoed this response by admitting she simply “fell into it.” Several others cited close location and flexible hours as reasons for their employment. These benefits were especially important to members who noted the college understood their need for work/life balance. Affirmative nods from focus group members suggested the practical benefits were important to many classified staff members.

Philosophical considerations. When asked to explain why she decided to work at a community college, one participant, without a moment’s hesitation, exclaimed, “I respect the mission.” She went on to expound on her belief that education should be on-
going and accessible to all segments of the population. Others repeated this basic idea, proudly touting the fact that they were helping to provide a quality education at an economic price. Similarly, staff members spoke of satisfying a “great need” in the community.

**Benevolence.** Many classified staff members highlighted the benevolent work aspect as the main community college attraction. They generally spoke of wanting to make a difference in other’s lives. Some talked about wanting to encourage others to succeed, while others noted the importance of helping people. More specifically, one participant explained how her own community college experience spurred her work choice. According to the former student, she came to work at the targeted institution because “I really felt I got a lot out of this place. I thought this place had a lot to offer people who needed a step up for whatever reason.” Overall, the general sense was the appeal of working at a community college did not center on material considerations.

**Educational environment.** Another frequently mentioned reason for working at the college was the educational environment. Overall, the classified staff members viewed the college mind-set as fostering pleasant work conditions. One respondent explained “it is not a tangible issue….I mean I still learn stuff, even just sitting at the desk.” Another contributor cited the pleasure of being around new ideas, noting she “learned something new each day.” These intangible benefits seemed to translate to actions. Staff members also liked being able to do different things, and appreciated the freedom to be creative and innovative in their jobs. One member specifically noted an appreciation for the many new opportunities available to her, especially with technology. The supportive and friendly student focus also extended to staff. One participant
described it as a "family" atmosphere, while another went so far as to call his work site the "love" campus. Finally, several staff members noted they appreciated the autonomy afforded to workers within the college.

**Student interaction.** A large part of the educational environment, however, was the student interaction. At one point in the interviews, all 21 participants mentioned they liked to work with students. Some staff members expressed a preference for specific groups. One member noted she enjoyed working with older women returning to the workforce; another worker zeroed in on her penchant for assisting international students. A front-line worker commented, "I think my job is kind of cool because I get to deal with the military students and I have a great respect for them." The majority of contributors cited students from various under-represented or marginal populations as important in their work. Regardless of personal preference, however, the "student-first" focus of community colleges attracted many of the classified staff members.

**Diversity.** Diversity also played a major role in drawing workers to the two-year colleges. Several participants cited working with international students as a main source of work satisfaction. Others spoke of diversity in age; some were motivated by students fresh out of high school, while others were inspired by the older, returning students. Variety within each individual also played a part for the workers. The enthusiasm of one worker was evident as he summed up the importance of diversity this way:

I call it a diversity of diversities. There is a diversity of ...having people from many different countries, different ethnicities, different citizenships, different ages – we are even associated with a high school program to senior citizens – diversity of interests .... diversity of experience...
from the housewife or stay at home dad ... to professionals coming back to learn the latest ... There is a wide range, and the benefit of that is everybody learns from everybody. And, that is what I love most about it [sic].

Diversity was not limited to the student population, however. The diverse faculty also contributed to the satisfying learning environment. Interacting with experts in various fields enabled staff members to learn about numerous topics in an on-going, yet non-structured manner. As one member explained, “in our division we deal with everything from business to psychology to IT to criminal justice – I mean there is such a wide variety of things, you never run out (of things to learn).” Another participant focused on a singular discipline, enjoying the diverse perspectives and experiences offered by faculty in that field. He used exchanges with faculty to further his own understanding and enhance his skills.

**Background Summary**

Classified staff members in this study represent a wide variety of individuals. They cannot be easily grouped according to education level or previous work experiences. They are also attracted to community college work for many different reasons. Although the practical aspects of location, convenience, and flexibility are important, the main reasons most choose to stay are philosophical in nature. That is, they want to help people and they enjoy the many benefits of working in an educational environment. However, as one staff member explained, seeing results in the students is what we are here to do, and “that is the ultimate satisfaction.”

**Content and Process of Staff to Student Interactions**

The first research question asked how front-line classified staff members interact
with students in a face-to-face setting. To explore this question, the researcher divided the query into three subdivisions. First, she examined the range of content and degree of complexity involved in student interactions with staff members. Next, she studied the extent of those interactions. Finally, the researcher sought to understand which interpersonal skills used by classified staff members proved most effective in dealing with students.

**Content and Complexity**

The front-line classified staff research participants covered a wide variety of student requests during a typical work day, ranging from personal concerns to academic requirements. As one staff member explained, the interactions involved “anything a student needs.” The complexity within each category varied from simple answers repeated several times each day to individual responses that required considerable research. The one common thread was that each interaction met a student need. In many ways, those needs enabled students to successfully continue their academic pursuits.

**First contacts.** Front-line classified staff members served as the first contact for many students. Several participants listed “greeting students” as a primary job responsibility. One respondent specified the importance of this interaction, noting her goal was to greet each student “within 15 seconds after entering the office.” Another contributor spoke of the critical position she held in welcoming students. Since the library was a familiar and easily accessible entity, she was often the initial college contact for many students. If she did not greet them warmly, she feared their impression of the college might be unjustly tainted.
Beyond the greeting, classified staff members considered it an unofficial part of their job to literally point students in the right direction. One member described herself as the “keeper of the building” and her office as the “information center.” These were not formally sanctioned descriptions, rather default positions that developed over time. Interestingly, her office was at the end of a corridor on the second floor of the building. Nevertheless, it was often the only open room in the building with easily accessible and available staff members.

In addition to showing students how to get somewhere, staff members also informed students where they needed to go. These interactions took place both inside and outside the offices. Many observed requests at the work places began with “where do I go for...? or who do I see about...?” Participants reported inquiries outside the office as more specific, generally requiring directions to find a particular office or person. One member recounted directing students while eating his daily lunch by the campus pond. Another contributor animatedly described routine stops by “wandering souls” moving around the nearly empty halls during the evening hours. After noticing her badge, lost students would approach her, desperately exclaiming “oh my goodness, someone who can help me find where to go!”

Many questions did not relate to the staff member’s position at the college. Rather, students asked front-line staff members for information regarding local bus schedules, meeting times and places, dates on the academic calendar, general college policies, and updates on current weather and events. They also expected staff members to know the whereabouts of various faculty members, as well as corresponding office hours. Some students asked staff members for faculty recommendations during
registration. There were even times when students asked for the name of their current instructor!

**Routine requests.** A number of routine requests were included in the content category. Although the needs varied from office to office, most were predictable. In the libraries and computer labs, students inundated classified staff members with requests for supplies. Staplers, hole punches, scrap paper, pencils, sharpeners, tape, rulers, paper clips, and other essentials comprised the steady stream of help desk requests. Testing center personnel repeatedly answered questions regarding testing protocol and time limits, while students asked financial aid workers for forms and filing dates. Instructional assistants seemed to have the most varied requests; however, they also fielded many recurring inquiries particular to the individual departments. To more efficiently meet the student needs, staff members posted signage to address the habitual issues. Nevertheless, students looked right past the signs and verbally solicited the items.

The list of “small” requests was extensive, and at times, somewhat quirky. One participant recalled a timid male student who asked for hand lotion. She willingly offered some of hers, beginning an exchange that was repeated several times during the semester. Much later, the student returned and thanked her for talking to him. The lotion was likely a ploy used to make a connection with someone at the college.

Many of the standard requests could be answered with general “college knowledge.” However, some routine needs required specific expertise. For example, students often asked classified staff members for technology help. Computer questions dominated this category, ranging from simple inquiries about setting margins to more complex requests of recovering lost documents. Library and computer lab personnel also
reported helping students master various software programs required for their classes.

Other classified staff members described work with students involving classroom media
equipment or tools relevant to a particular office.

**Complex considerations.** Classified staff communications with students were
not limited to mundane requests. Many interactions required complex and unique
responses. Financial aid issues, in particular, posed many challenging scenarios. Staff
members in this area answered questions involving in-state tuition concerns, international
student status, tax considerations, scholarships, and other complicated matters. Similarly,
classified staff members in student services and the business office interpreted a variety
of regulations and exceptions when certifying veterans for retirement or assisting with
securing eligible benefits.

Testing center personnel also tackled complicated interactions. One recurring
challenge involved helping students interpret placement test scores. This was an
especially demanding task when dealing with students who were disappointed in their
scores. They also administered faculty examinations according to individual protocols,
often holding the line on students requesting additional time or assistance. Finally,
testing center staff initiated some difficult conversations with students caught cheating.

All participants related demanding interactions within their own sphere of
influence. Sometimes the challenges were obvious, as students posed complicated
questions. However, the most trying part of their jobs was often deciphering what
students really needed. As one member explained, “the initial question the person asks is
often not really what they need to know.” This is not because the student is being
intentionally difficult. Rather, many students simply do not know what to ask. Staff
members emphasized this point in explaining the complexity of their interactions with students.

**Extent of Interactions**

The researcher evaluated the extent of classified staff interactions with students according to the number of interactions, the length of the exchanges, and the level of staff member involvement. She found the extent of interactions varied widely in all categories. Similar to the content and complexity of the interactions, the extent depended on the individual student. The classified staff job description also impacted the extent of interaction, as did the position title. The one consistent thread was the focus on satisfactorily meeting student needs.

**Number of interactions.** Participants reported interacting with as few as six to as many as 400+ students in one day. The considerable variance in numbers depended on both the staff member’s job and the time of year. For example, administrative assistants in the offices of a provost or dean dealt with relatively few students, sometimes going several days without a contact. Staff members in student-centered work spaces, however, described the flow of interactions as “constant” and a “steady stream all day.” Participants estimated student interactions between 20% and 65% of their total job responsibilities.

At both extremes, numbers increased according to the time of year. All participants reported elevated statistics at the beginning of each semester, particularly the fall semester. Most offices also saw a boost in student contacts near the end of the semester. Other swells in numbers depended on the office. Registration and application deadlines amplified student contacts in financial aid, division offices, and student
services. Midterm and final projects and exams raised numbers in the libraries and open computer labs. Both registration and academic requirements augmented testing center traffic due to placement tests and make-up exams. In all areas and at all times, front-line classified staff members reported increased levels of student contact as compared to previous years.

Length of interactions. The researcher found the length of staff interactions with students ranged from singular contacts to a series of exchanges that resulted in a relationship. Based on those parameters, lengths extended from momentary connections to multi-year affiliations. Participants most often reported positive outcomes with students with whom they engaged in long-term associations. However, the researcher also noted many brief, but effective, interactions. Regardless of length, a successful interaction met the student need.

Classified staff members handled routine, simple requests in seconds, often completing the interaction while processing another task. Specifically, the researcher observed staff members interact with students while holding on a telephone call, waiting for a file to download, and printing a document. These interactions included pointing a person in the direction of a restroom, indicating the location of a pencil sharpener, or summoning them to proceed in line. Workers also frequently waved hello or good-bye to familiar students while engaged in another activity. Many of these interactions took place without spoken words. Rather, the staff member used hand gestures to respond, often punctuating the exchange with eye contact and a smile. This ability to multi-task enabled personnel to deal with the high volume of student requests associated with peak times.
More complicated routine tasks took longer, usually ranging between one and five minutes. Despite the increased complexity of the requests, staff usually handled the issues quickly and efficiently. This was particularly true with computer and other equipment-related issues. The researcher observed staff members trouble-shoot and fix several hardware problems, enabling students to resume work. When appropriate, or as time permitted, staff members extended the interaction by several minutes, explaining to the student how to prevent future problems.

Staff members also handled academic and financial questions with equal efficiency, usually keeping interactions under five minutes. Although many of the answers required several steps, the participants promptly responded in a clear, organized manner. Some workers used prepared checklists to visually show students what they needed; others drew diagrams as they spoke. The repetition enabled staff members to provide a large amount of information in a short amount of time. Nevertheless, workers assured students understood the information. One participant explained how she reviewed testing procedures and then routinely asked students to “demonstrate back to me that you understand.”

Staff members spent considerably more time working on unique situations. The length of time varied so much that including a specific range would not be relevant or useful. For example, some complicated financial aid situations took 30 to 60 minutes to resolve, as compared to the typical five to ten minute interactions. In another office, one student request for help with a broken camera consumed close to two hours. Other interactions reportedly spanned several days, with students returning several times to check on the status of an on-going situation. Finally, during the course of shorter
interactions, classified staff members established relationships that lasted throughout the college experience. In some cases, students maintained contact years after leaving the institution.

**Level of involvement.** Classified staff members became involved with students through daily interactions, unique circumstances, and long-term relationships. Casual exchanges, such as opening a door for a student or sharing an elevator allowed for little more than a smile and pleasant greeting. As expected, more frequent and/or numerous contacts led to greater involvement. However, some staff members invested considerable time and effort while working with students during one isolated encounter. Overall, participants claimed a desire to be involved with students. One contributor described her role as “participatory,” suggesting an active role in student interactions. Others spoke of the importance of building and maintaining relationships, reflecting dynamic student encounters.

**Routine encounters.** Although classified staff members aspired to engage students, some achieved only minimal levels of involvement during routine interactions. In fact, some exchanges were so habitual, neither the staff member nor the student seemed to acknowledge one another. The researcher noted this lack of connection when students returned equipment or completed a transaction while distracted. Similarly, the researcher observed staff distractions and multi-tasking negatively impacted student exchanges. Although staff members met the basic student need, there was no indication of engagement.

Despite the repetitive nature of many communications, other classified staff members did connect with students through routine interactions. One participant spoke
of how she built relationships, starting with a simple hello. Another respondent described walking students to the business office, assuring their financial transactions were completed properly. Similarly, a contributor praised her supervisor for taking a student to a hard-to-find office, rather than simply reciting a room number. As the worker explained, the supervisor’s extra effort was “good for the student and also good for the other staff.” She thought it was important to show student commitment through both words and deeds.

Extraordinary efforts. Research participants described incidents where they personally put forth extraordinary effort for a student during a seemingly ordinary exchange. One dramatic example involved a veteran who had recently returned from combat. The staff member described how he noticed the individual wandering in the hall, seeming to be lost. He initiated contact with the man and offered assistance, but the veteran declined the offer. Nevertheless, the staff member believed the man needed help, gave him a business card, and suggested he call if he was ever in need of assistance. A few days later, the veteran phoned the staff member in despair over his life situation. The situation was beyond the staff member’s capabilities, so he put the veteran in immediate contact with a representative from the Wounded Warrior Project. The veteran later thanked him for saving his life.

A second example of a routine encounter with exceptional staff effort involved a participant who worked with a financially-strapped single mother. The student could not register until she paid a parking ticket. Barely able to pay tuition, she left the staff member’s office, unsure how she would meet the obligation. The staff member
anonymously paid the ticket. She then called the student and simply told her the situation was resolved. Both examples elucidated how staff involvement impacts students.

Staff members involved students during every interaction, recognizing that there is often only a small amount of time to make a difference. As one member earnestly explained, “I help as thoroughly as I can, because once they get their help, they’re gone.” She went on to say that she needed to “close the loop” when students were being given the “run-around.” Other participants echoed this sentiment, extending the assistance to potential students as well as those who graduated. For example, one staff member recounted an experience with a former student who returned years after graduation to obtain a copy of his transcript. After failed attempts to secure the needed document by internet and phone, he came to the campus for assistance. The length of time since graduation created complications in finding his record. After being sent to several campus offices, the former student finally interacted with the research participant. She was willing to see the issue through to completion. Although technically not part of her job description, the staff member made it a point to become involved in the student’s problem and find a solution.

Additional duties. Participants also interacted with students in capacities that were not part of their primary duties. These interactions included supervising work study students, overseeing volunteers, advising clubs, organizing orientation activities, and teaching study skill classes. The additional duties required a significant time and energy commitment. However, staff members reported personal gains commensurate with what they contributed. Several examples revealed the mutual benefits of long-term student involvement.
An example of successful student interaction entailed a newly-formed volunteer program. One research participant proudly described how he developed a group of volunteers to provide service to the college. He began with an assembly of students who simply had an interest in his area of work. He did not look for students with any particular expertise; rather, he recruited as many students as possible. He then allowed them to attempt various jobs, identifying their skills and noting their interests in the process. As the students gained experience, they learned new things; in turn, they taught others. Soon, they were also teaching the staff member. As he explained, “they teach me things, I teach them things, and it works out very nicely.” The initial investment in time and effort paid off as several of the volunteers became as valuable as paid staff members, thus alleviating some of the excess workload. The students gained experience in the field, while enjoying the camaraderie of a tight-knit group. The group continues to flourish today. Although the number of volunteers varies from semester to semester, both staff and students seem to consistently benefit from the involvement.

Another staff member offered a success story involving an individual volunteer. An international student approached him, expressing interest in his area of expertise. Although he had no specific work for her, he agreed to allow her to volunteer in the work area. Her interest blossomed, and her talents developed quickly. Her new skills resulted in first prize win at a college exhibit. As her confidence grew, she began sharing her knowledge with other students. Again, the willingness of the staff member to become involved with the student created a beneficial situation for both the student and the program.
Work study students also captured the attention of classified staff members. One participant fondly recalled working years ago with a young man who was new to this country. Although very bright, he lacked understanding of our culture. His halting English also made it difficult for him to work in offices that required him to answer a phone. The staff member found paperwork for him to do, while he mastered both the new language and customs. The student returned several years later to thank the staff member for her support. He had become a medical doctor, and with his help, so did his four younger siblings.

The researcher observed several close relationships between staff and student workers. One student reported to work with a backpack full of spilled soup, the result of a particularly hectic morning. The staff member patiently helped her clean up the mess, showing her where to dry out damaged papers and helping her to replace ruined items. Once the backpack was clean, the staff member engaged the student in talk about her young daughter and plans for the coming day. By the end of the interaction, the student was noticeably calmer. Other student workers chatted easily with staff supervisors, recounting weekend experiences and complaining about daily stressors. The relationships appeared relaxed, with students enjoying the engagement.

**Effective Skills**

Classified staff members used various interpersonal skills while interacting with students. The researcher observed examples of both verbal and non-verbal communication, noting the corresponding responses from students. Participants also reported their opinions on the most important abilities for front-line staff to possess. Some traits could not be specifically observed; however, staff exchanges with students
provided examples of behaviors associated with those qualities. Classified staff used a variety of skills in different situations, with no one skill emerging as most essential. Therefore, the researcher summarized findings without an attempt to prioritize.

**Be respectful.** Research participants demonstrated respect for students in all interactions. Classified staff addressed students by name, when available, and allowed them to speak without interruption. Participants consistently said please and thank you, especially to reinforce appropriate behavior. One staff member, delighted that a student had followed through on a complicated process, acknowledged the effort by sincerely saying “thank you for being such a good listener!” The student smiled broadly in response. Staff members also suspended judgment on students, embracing diversity among the population.

Staff members showed respect for the student’s time by attempting to serve each individual as quickly and efficiently as possible. They paid attention to each student concern, never giving them “the brush off.” Contributors also verbally acknowledged the importance of respect in their work. One participant, discussing an administrative focus on retention statistics, warned that staff must not allow students to become just another number. Rather, she emphasized, “respect is the key.” Respondents also noted that giving respect garnered respect from the students, creating a mutually beneficial situation.

Another way participants showed respect was by trusting the student’s abilities. Although they did not verbally associate respect with this behavior, they demonstrated it by allowing student to make decisions and do things on their own. One contributor urged other staff members to recognize and value student capabilities. She advised “don’t
hand-hold them; do not baby them.” Rather, she advocated encouraging them to take responsibility and “fly, little birdie, fly.” Another respondent echoed this sentiment explaining her goal with students was “to never see them again.” She was quick to clarify she was referring only to the immediate issue. She hoped that her one-time guidance would enable them to handle their own situations in the future.

**Be approachable.** Classified staff members spoke of being open to students so they would be comfortable asking a question. Participants demonstrated openness by smiling at students, saying hello, and initiating conversations. They made an effort to reach out to students in their offices, as well as in the hallways and other common areas. One staff member commented on the importance of cultivating a “friendly, supportive environment.” She explained the benefits of this in regards to student success. She went on to say many students were often too intimidated to ask for help, especially with computer problems. Although she worked in Information Technology, she did not view herself as a “techy” person. Rather, she considered herself a “people person,” usually being the first to seek out a person and welcome them. She attributed her success with students in the computer labs to this interpersonal skill. Her openness to students made it more likely they would approach her with their technology questions.

**Be a good communicator.** Participants clearly demonstrated and acknowledged the importance of effective communication skills in student interactions. The researcher observed staff members non-verbally communicating by making eye contact, smiling, presenting an open body stance, and maintaining appropriate personal space. She also noted well-modulated voice tones and frequency. When speaking to international students, staff members tended to slow their rate of speech, and enunciated words more
specifically. The researcher also observed staff members use welcoming hand gestures, such as a wave, a thumbs-up, and curled fingers to indicate it was time to proceed to the counter. Students responded with similar non-verbal behaviors, most notably smiles. Conversely, one staff member seemed to become absorbed in paperwork, consistently looking down while working the front-desk. Students responded in kind; returning keys and picking up needed items without acknowledging the staff member.

The researcher observed participants using specific verbal communication skills with students. Overall, contributors spoke clearly to students using standard English and appropriate vocabulary. Whenever necessary, staff members explained technical or confusing terms. For example, one student needed clarification between loan and grant on a financial aid form; another was unsure what was meant by a placement test. Staff members explained the terms using different words and examples. When presenting complicated instructions, participants methodically listed information for students, verbally numbering steps as they spoke. Some workers reinforced the verbal message with printed handouts. Classified staff members also asked students to repeat information, especially if the message was long or complicated.

The researcher saw evidence that staff members actively listened to students. First, they consistently responded to the content of the student’s inquiry. However, they also reacted to the student’s non-verbal cues, reflecting the feeling in the message. Participants commented on student feelings by saying “you seem confused,” or “that must have been frustrating.” Students responded by agreeing or expanding on the feeling. Staff members recognized the importance of good listening skills in working
with students. Several participants emphasized this ability when asked for a final statement on staff interactions with students.

**Be patient.** Repetitive student requests required staff members to provide the same information to students many times per day. Participants described this part of the job as “tedious” and pain-staking, and they acknowledged their tendencies to become annoyed with the monotony. Nevertheless, they realized the information was new to each student. They also understood the challenge students face in understanding the system. As one participant explained, “coming from being a student and going through the whole college experience, I know how frustrating it is, so I try to ease the process. I help them understand things. It is a very complicated process.” For these reasons, staff members considered patience an important skill in helping students deal with an unfamiliar experience.

**Be compassionate.** Classified staff members recognized the many stressors students handle each day. Participants empathized with the busy schedules required to juggle school, work, and family. They described the isolation of international students, far from family, friends, and familiar surroundings. Contributors realized the challenge combat veterans face adjusting to the civilian world. They also identified with the hesitation of older students returning to school.

Beyond the known stressors, however, staff members understood there were unknown problems beneath the surface of each student. One participant explained, “Every person has something they are dealing with that I might not be aware of, so I try not to let that affect my paradigm of the individual.” Another respondent warned “a segment of the population is emotionally disturbed.” She went on to describe her
interactions with one student who was medicated for psychological reasons. Some days she approached the staff member with a smile and a thank you; other days she almost threw papers at her, demanding “I need this.” That student’s behaviors were obvious; however, others were not as blatant. A shooting on one of the campuses made staff members keenly aware of this reality. For all these reasons, participants urged compassion when dealing with students.

**Be sensitive.** Increasing diversity among the student population required heightened sensitivity, according to participants. Staff members emphasized all student variations, including those of different ethnic backgrounds, religions, ages, and sexual orientations. They urged other personnel to become aware of situations in which diverse students feel excluded or uncomfortable. For example, one participant recounted working with a female student who required the presence of a male relative to attend an all day field trip. Another staff member recalled helping an older student set up her laptop because “all the other students in the classrooms can use their laptops and I can’t.” Respondents maintained sensitivity to these differences contributed to more positive student interactions.

**Be detail-oriented.** Classified staff members cited reasons attention to detail was crucial to successful interactions. Participants focused on student details to notice the “subtleties of human behavior.” This skill enabled workers to detect emotions and assess potentially volatile situations. It also alerted personnel to incongruent behaviors associated with cheating or providing false information. Overall, noticing key elements of behavior led to more comprehensive communications.
Focusing on details also prevented unnecessary student problems. For example, one participant recounted an incident in which another front desk worker inadvertently returned a military identification card to the wrong student. She discovered the error when the military member attempted to retrieve the credential. To complicate matters, he was deploying to Afghanistan the next day, and the student with the wrong card could not be immediately reached. Although the situation was successfully resolved, the inattention to detail created a negative experience for the military student. Conversely, proper attention to details from the other student enabled staff members to resolve the problem and lessen the negative impact.

This research focused on face to face interactions; however, contributors insisted the corresponding administrative work was also essential to successful student encounters. Staff members explained how improperly assessed veteran certifications, or incomplete financial aid forms could delay student benefits, causing dropped classes or unnecessary monetary burdens. Testing center personnel emphasized the importance of entering accurate test data, assuring students could register for appropriate classes. Other participants stressed vigilance in verifying student information and meeting deadlines. Finally, contributors urged workers to follow through on student issues until complete. This prevents students from “falling through the cracks,” builds trust, and models appropriate life skills.

**Be knowledgeable.** Students depended on classified staff members to provide accurate information. Participants realized that no matter how “nice” they were to students, successful interactions involved students receiving appropriate information. All participants reported confidence in their ability to perform job tasks. Nevertheless, they
emphasized the importance of "constant training," especially in new technologies.

Contributors reported proactive efforts in staying current. As one staff member explained, "I take it upon myself...I want to be as knowledgeable as I can, and as skilled as I can." Other contributors increased their knowledge by reading newsletters, talking with colleagues, and attending workshops. One participant also made full use of the employee educational benefits, enrolling in new courses each semester.

**Be student-centered.** Despite many competing distractions, participants remained student-centered. One contributor claimed all support staff, along with corresponding policies and procedures, should "support the mission of the college—meaning teaching students." Echoing this sentiment, another worker stated "I know when a student walks through that door, I want to be focused on that student." The researcher observed this single-mindedness in the workplaces, as participants routinely set aside paperwork to assist students.

Staff members also became student advocates in their own areas. One person suggested her allegiance was "like a history teacher saying this is the most important subject in the world." She believed in her own job, "I have to feel my population is the most important in the world." Participants claimed "working with students" as the most satisfying part of their jobs. Their commitment to being student-focused supported that claim.

**Be happy.** Humor highlighted many of the research interviews and observations. Staff members punctuated responses to students with good-natured kidding and laughter. Students responded in kind, sharing humorous anecdotes with college personnel. The researcher observed one study stop by an office just to share the story of a funny incident
that occurred over the weekend. His exchange with the research participant indicated a comfortable relationship independent of meeting an immediate administrative need.

Staff used humor to reduce their own stress, as well as calm students. One participant, worn out with bureaucratic requirements, came to work one day dressed in red tights and a cape. His transformation into “Red Tape Man” was meant to slash the “red tape” of the college. That same staff member compiled a college playlist with songs such as “Low Budget by The Kings, and “You Got Me Jerking Back and Forth” by Diva. Although he did not share his humor with students, the comedy relieved tension in the workplace. He believed the lower stress indirectly benefitted staff interactions with students.

In much less dramatic fashion, staff members used humor to directly relate to students. One library worker ordered small candies with “Quiet Please” printed on the wrapper. Rather than nag students to be quiet in the study areas, she simply approached a loud group of students with a tray of candy. Most group members willingly accepted the chocolate with a smile and noticeably lower voices. Another participant, frustrated with repeating information to a student, gently asked her to “put on her listening ears” prior to explaining a complicated financial process. Again, the phrase elicited a student smile and cooperation. Overall, classified staff members enhanced student interactions by using appropriate humor to alleviate stress, punctuate an important point, or build relationships.

Content and Process Summary

Front-line classified staff interactions with students varied widely in regards to content, complexity, and extent of interactions. The variables did not impact the importance of the exchange. That is, participants demonstrated how short and simple
connections positively influenced students. They also explained how long and complicated contacts with staff members benefit learners. Employee behaviors did impact the quality of interactions, however. The researcher identified several skills that increased the likelihood of positive student interactions.

**Classified Staff Perspectives on Student Interactions**

The second research question explored the importance of interactions with students to front-line classified staff members. The researcher considered three categories while investigating this subject. First, she invited staff members to explain what role their interactions played in the educational process. She then investigated how the interactions related to the college mission. Finally, she explored the participant satisfaction level with student interactions.

**Role in Educational Process**

Classified staff members believed their interactions positively impacted the student experience. Although many encounters contributed to the overall educational process, participants specified how they helped students acquire academic and life skills. Along with these skills, contributors encouraged students, helping them gain confidence to achieve their goals. Staff members also engaged students in the college, creating the atmosphere for success to occur. Finally, they administratively supported students from admission to graduation.

**General considerations.** Research participants verbally expressed awareness of their role in student success. Personnel casually mentioned “contributing to the learning experience,” or being “part of the educational process.” One worker considered her role “huge.” However, most members spoke more modestly of the “little things” they did to
meet student needs. Although the emphasis varied, all contributors agreed there were
“multiple ways to be academic.”

The researcher observed classified staff involvement in every part of the campus. She
also saw evidence of their work at every stage of matriculation. Participants maintained they were the first to welcome students to

 campus, assisting with the admissions and registration process. One staff member highlighted the importance of this interaction when she explained “some of them might take six months just to get up the nerve to even walk in the door.” Thus, workers considered greeting students an honor, proudly declaring “I get to greet them.” Another participant became actively involved in welcoming students. Using her knowledge of the various campus offices, she developed a scavenger hunt for use at new student orientation.

At the other end of the academic experience, personnel worked with students to meet graduation requirements. For example, one student thought he had completed all necessary requirements for transfer to a university. Unfortunately, the four-year school notified him they would not accept six of his credits from a foreign transcript. Counselors explained which courses he needed; however, he could not find any available classes. One research participant sat with the distraught student to discover possible options. He completed the courses during the summer, in time to start at the university in the fall.

Classified staff members were also involved at many points between admissions and graduation. Members of this group provide the “one person who is there all the time.” That is, if the college is open, a classified staff member is generally available. During work hours, one participant claimed she simply helped “to whatever extent
possible.” Another worker, explained how she tried to “ease the process” of college. Speaking as a former student, she spoke of how she tried to help them learn from her experience. “It is a complicated process,” she said, “I help them understand things.”

**Building skills.** Classified staff members demonstrated and described ways in which their student interactions built both academic and life skills. Some skills were specific and concrete, enabling the student to complete a certain college task. Other abilities were general and more abstract, requiring the learner to apply the information across the educational experience. Both groupings enhanced the learning process. Evidence of increased skill depended on student self-reports.

Specific and concrete skills primarily involved use of hardware and software resources. Students required help with unfamiliar, specialized equipment, such as the machines found in the photography and media labs. According to one participant, “teachers really need to be teaching the concepts and not worry about incorporating the equipment.” In addition to the discipline-related gear, learners stumbled with use of basic office machines, including printers, faxes, and scanners. However, the majority of questions concerned computers. Students required help with computer operation and use of academic software programs.

Staff members mainly assisted older students; however, even the more technologically-advanced younger students presented numerous questions. Although computer lab personnel provided the majority of support, students sought help from any willing worker. Sometimes the assistance was minor, such as learning to log on to the college system or set up a password; other times, students required more in-depth help.
Common student requests included assistance with the college electronic learning system, academic software, and library databases.

Participants worked most extensively with the least skilled students. Computer-illiterate students required more than one interaction to master the unfamiliar technology. One participant outlined the process this way:

So I said, let’s get up to the computer and I pull up a chair and I sit right beside them and I give them one on one instruction on how to get on, how to find data, everything...and so, the first day it is that part of it – and I say “now you come back tomorrow and I will help you” – and so the next day they come back – and they remember how to turn the computer on and the password and all that – so, we got that straight – and then by the third day they come back and they say, “I got it! I got it!” and I say, ok, I’ve helped a student.

Other participants used a similar hands-on approach. Contributors also commented that many students needed to go over procedures multiple times before becoming self-sufficient.

Classified staff members helped students acquire concrete skills necessary to maneuver the academic bureaucracy. Financial aid personnel focused on monetary concerns, helping students understand Pell grants, secure student loans, and become aware of little-known scholarships. One student remarked, “I never know what is legitimate.” The staff member advised “here’s one way to know – never pay a fee. Also, go to websites with .gov or .org, not .com.” Another student shared an ambitious plan to graduate ahead of schedule. The participant cautioned “don’t overload.” She then went
on to explain the financial repercussions of withdrawing or failing a class. The student expressed surprise with the new information.

Students also required help with the crucial task of properly registering for classes. One contributor explained at the beginning of last semester, she had a student say “I have an 8 o’clock class in this room and I can’t find it.” The reason was usually the classroom was on another campus. Although the catalog clearly outlined scheduling particulars, abbreviations and college jargon confused the student. This was further complicated when the institution used more than one name for the same item. For example, registration forms asked for an index number, while the catalog referred to the same indicator as a class number. Many students managed to decipher the difference on their own; however, one staff member explained, “if you are in a developmental class, sometimes you are not comprehending.”

The researcher found evidence the participants helped students build more general and abstract skills. One staff member believed some students enter college without “the skill set to understand what they need to be a successful student.” She elaborated by saying “maybe they haven’t been taught certain etiquettes or protocols that would help them be successful in life.” She also mused they might be “so busy they don’t make the time, or the right choices, to plan ahead.” For whatever reason, the staff member tried to “help them juggle the many different things that are going on in their lives.” Other contributors assisted students by suggesting options or helping them find resources to succeed.

Staff members also developed planning and time management skills, particularly when working with work study and volunteer students. One staff member described her
frustration supervising student-led events. According to her, “they have no clue about organizing an event, they have no clue.” Their lack of experience results in “lots of last minute requests” because “they didn’t think of this and that.” Despite her obvious annoyance, she went on to say, “they need more training and I am in the position to give them what they need to do the job well.”

Although all research participants appeared eager to assist students, they were careful not to help too much. One staff member verbalized this balance saying, “everyone needs help in the beginning,...our goal is that they can take care of themselves.” Other contributors echoed similar sentiments, worrying aloud that “they rely on me too much.” One group member advised colleagues not to “baby” students. All targeted staff members somehow expressed a desire to empower students.

**Providing encouragement.** Classified staff members contributed to the educational process by encouraging struggling students. One contributor cited the “encouragement factor” as her primary role. Other participants spoke of helping to decrease anxiety or increase self-concepts. Personnel used the term “support” when referring to their role with students, emphasizing their designation as support staff. Specifically, a group member stated her role was to “help students who don’t have a support system.”

Participants encouraged students by assuring, empathizing, motivating, and strategizing. For example, contributors assured students by building confidence in their own abilities, enabling them to take care of themselves. One staff member animatedly told of helping an older student with a complicated computer issue. The learner moaned “I don’t know if I can do it,” and the worker enthusiastically told her “you can do it, yes
you can!” Another worker thought students were encouraged by the simple fact that she was older and believed in them.

One respondent explained how she reassured a hesitant young man in the process of applying to the college. She alleviated his concern about college, commending him for his high placement test scores and explaining the opportunities available in his chosen major. Later in the day, the staff member received a phone call from the young man’s mother thanking her for her efforts. The incoming student was a twin, and his brother was preparing to attend a more competitive four-year school. Reportedly, the staff member boosted the spirits and confidence of the prospective student.

Research participants encouraged students by empathizing with them and serving as role models for future success. A foreign-born worker related to international students, explaining “we have been like them before...we know what they go through and we know how to handle the situation.” Similarly, a combat-tested staff member spoke of his ability to relate to the military population. Not all personnel shared similar experiences, though. Some encouraged students with tales of their own career journey, demonstrating many paths to success.

Motivation also played a part in “the encouragement factor.” Speaking of her role working with students, one staff member enthusiastically declared “I believe everybody in life has the ability to have that desire to learn – to want to be motivated and to motivate others – it is just how you tap into it!” Some workers motivated with “little things” such as candy and smiles. Others challenged students to stay focused, gently prodding them when they wavered. For example, one staff member stopped a student in the hall and mentioned she had not seen her in the library lately; another reminded a student to follow
up on a scholarship submission. Ultimately, participants acknowledged the goal was to motivate them to achieve their goals. As one contributor said, "they come in here with a dream" and her job was to help them achieve it.

Staff members also provided encouragement by helping students develop strategies for dealing with challenging situations. One individual remembered a distraught student who had just failed an exam. He sat in her office and cried, unsure what to do next. After initially consoling him, she urged him to follow specific steps to get on track, including speaking with his professor. He returned several weeks later to say he took her advice, the teacher gave him a re-test, and he passed. Other workers offered similar help to test-takers, recommending practice tests, telling them to focus, and suggesting breaks between exams.

**Engaging students.** Research participants cited student engagement as a way they contributed to the educational process. Respondents believed engagement developed students both personally and academically. One staff member spoke of her desire to "cultivate a collegiate environment;" while another worker wanted to foster a "sense of community." Several staff members heralded the importance of forming friendships, especially for isolated or "at risk" students. Overall, respondents thought engaging students resulted in increased satisfaction, leading to higher retention.

Classified staff members connected with students by sponsoring photo contests, coaching soccer teams, advising interest clubs, and recommending students for scholarships. Two participants encouraged students to become involved from the top, offering leadership positions when organizing college events. One worker found this tactic especially effective with international students. She explained, "They take
leadership positions just to get connected.” Participants found it difficult to sustain engagement, however. They cited the high student turnover rate as an impediment to sustaining their initiatives.

Beyond organized activities, staff members worked to engage students every day. One participant recognized that students “don’t know anyone when they first get here.” Therefore, when someone new comes in the library, she says “hello.” The next time, she will start a little conversation, asking, “how are you today?” and “do you like your classes?” Generally, by the third day, she claims they are speaking to her first, cheerfully calling out a “Good morning, how are you?”

**Administrative assistance.** Classified staff members believed their administrative duties indirectly supported student interactions and added to the educational process. Their work in general administrative and technical support, purchasing and maintaining equipment, and managing budgets enabled the college to run smoothly. Their efforts in controlling noise and trouble-shooting problems created a safe and efficient study environment. Their time spent developing exhibits and bulletin board displays made for a pleasant academic atmosphere. Lastly, their daily service increased convenience for students, thus reducing stress. Overall, the administrative work afforded them the opportunity to interact with students in a positive manner.

**Role in College Mission**

The mission of the targeted institution reflected values common to all community colleges. These included open access to educational opportunities, commitment to student success, and a focus on excellence. Research participants exhibited awareness of these goals, and indicated congruence with them. One contributor addressed this directly,
stating “I respect the mission of the college because I believe education should be an on­
going thing.” She went on to say “whatever segments of the population we can stimulate to appreciate educational refreshment – I am very proud to participate in that.” The researcher found evidence of classified staff contributions toward all mission objectives.

Open access. Participants embraced the open access component of community colleges, citing student diversity as one of the primary reasons for job satisfaction. Staff members welcomed all students to the institution, with special consideration for special populations. The researcher saw no evidence of overt or subtle prejudice against any demographic group, including those identified by age, gender, or ethnicity. Rather, she noted specific efforts to connect with older learners, women, and international students. Their willingness to reach out to under-represented students supported the open access mission of the institution.

One participant elucidated her appreciation for open access with a story from her campus. She hesitantly described a frequent visitor to the library as a “bag lady,” for lack of a better term. She admitted discussing the woman with other employees, wondering if the poorly dressed woman was a student. The participant saw no reason to deny her access and afforded her the same respect as others. One day the woman asked for computer assistance. The staff member complied and began a conversation. The dialogue revealed the woman was indeed a student, preparing to transfer to a prestigious four-year school.

Staff members also promoted open access with community outreach. As one member remarked, “I am out there selling the school.” Participants spoke of being “community connections,” often interacting with students beyond the campus grounds.
One participant recounted “a big reception” by a student at a local grocery store. Although she had only spoken with the student once, the student greeted her “like we were going to exchange the baby’s baptism date!” Others recalled less dramatic encounters, such as being recognized at local restaurants. Overall, chance meetings provided a bridge between the college and the community.

In addition to random meetings, staff members actively pursued community outreach. For example, one contributor discussed her involvement with a neighborhood tutoring program for at-risk high school students. The failing students receive individual tutoring from various community members, including staff and students from the college. The goal of the program is to simply move students “from the failing side to the positive side.” The goal of the staff member is “to get them to know us.” She boasted success in achieving that objective, noting “a lot of the kids are now going to (college name).” Her next goal is to convince the college president to partner with the program in an official capacity.

**Student success.** Congruent with the college mission, participants acknowledged open access was not sufficient for student success. Rather, they expressed concern for “lost” or struggling students who seemed “overwhelmed” with the college bureaucracy. One staff member empathized with their situation, noting “everyone just wants to be successful.” Consequently, participants made it a point to routinely raise awareness about college opportunities, enabling students to fully participate in both academic and extra-curricular programs. They were also instrumental in maintaining programs, tracking usage, serving as points of contact, and recommending improvements. They believed these activities contributed to the likelihood of student success.
Staff members focused on alleviating roadblocks for students. Financial matters frequently impeded students from achieving their goals, thus staff members often targeted this area. One contributor believed it was important to serve as a “reality check” for students, explaining the limitations of financial aid awards. Another member encouraged a student to have her transcript evaluated to avoid “paying for a repetition of courses.” A third worker tried to elucidate the challenge of simultaneously working and going to school full-time. Several participants supported students in trying to juggle both responsibilities, especially those supervising work-study recipients.

Individually, financial aid personnel worked to secure the greatest amount of available aid in a timely manner. One worker recalled a situation in which a husband and wife had been coming in approximately three times a month for two months. Despite promises from several staff members, their convoluted financial aid issue was not resolved. As the registration deadline neared, the students were becoming increasingly impatient and upset. The staff member methodically reviewed the case, devised a proposed solution, and forwarded the email up the departmental chain. Her advocacy removed a bureaucratic barrier for the couple, as well as future students facing a similar situation.

While some workers promoted student success outside the classroom, others assisted students in mastering concepts taught inside the classroom. One participant believed his role was to “serve as a bridge between the faculty and the student.” He took this role seriously, explaining how he had to first understand what the instructors were teaching so as to not confuse the students. He was simply there to “reinforce the concepts.” He went on to explain that students leave the classroom thinking they
understand how to complete a task; however, it is not always as clear when they sit down to do it. As the one staff member who was always available, he had to "play the balance" between assisting the student and assuring work was completed independently. He considered himself a "backup to the instructors" and a necessary component of student success.

Staff members also helped students achieve the success through program completion. One worker discussed how she made a difference in this area, even though it was not part of her regular job description. She explained:

...then there are other students who have been here over a year or two years and didn’t [sic] have any sense of where they were or a degree or a degree program...and to sit down with them – and I would just take that extra few minutes with them to say, “you know what? – you only need that course for this degree – and you can also get general studies for taking that course – oh! and you completed the business certificate from us – and congratulations! – two degrees with a few more courses.

Although the description was likely a compilation of several experiences, the staff member made her point. Another contributor recalled a special needs student who "had to have help every step of the way." He celebrated her success when she graduated with a "C" average in a general studies degree.

**Excellence.** Classified staff members demonstrated a commitment to excellence, the third mission statement component. Expressions of institutional pride revealed this devotion, with a variety of comments alluding to "a quality education at an economical price." Maintaining this status seemed important to participants, with one remarking “I
am very concerned about the college reputation.” She went on to say it was her job to uphold that standing. Similarly, another contributor acknowledged responsibility for preserving excellence, noting “people on the front lines keep the college rolling.”

Personnel promoted excellence by holding themselves and students to high standards. One staff member vowed to pursue personal improvement, claiming “I want to grow and develop.” Referring to a deficit of time and money for college-sponsored instruction, another worker pledged “I’ll get my own training.” A promise to “work smarter, not harder,” hinted at an underlying concern for quality for a third contributor. Numerous additional comments reflected a similar message.

The researcher observed high quality staff behaviors. All research participants represented the college in a professional manner. Personnel dressed in casual office attire. Offices were tidy, with appropriate personal accents. Conversations focused on work-related topics, or friendly banter that created a welcoming atmosphere. Language was suitable for business, showing respect for all individuals. Classified staff members exhibited efficient work habits, often checking on one student while another completed a separate task. The researcher did not view any exceptions to these descriptions.

Participants actively pursued excellence by maintaining academic integrity. Several members hinted at this, alluding to the fact that their help did not extend to doing student work. Testing center personnel, vigilantly guarding against cheating, offered the best example of commitment to academic integrity. Prior to taking an exam, workers checked identification cards, verified cell phones were off, and required students to place all personal belongings in cubicles. During the test, personnel watched students through a glass enclosure, while simultaneously monitoring each student computer screen. The
researcher did not observe any incidents of student misconduct. However, the observed participant explained she dealt with dishonesty by telling students:

I am sorry the test is over right now. Of course, I will have to make my reports. However, I want you to be aware if you are struggling in class, we do have the academic center of excellence...that is a resource that provides tutoring once a week for the courses you are enrolled in.

She clarified her twofold goal as letting students know help was available and avoiding future compromises to academic integrity.

Classified staff members also upheld excellence by finding ways to improve services. Some suggestions were specific to the office. For example, one worker noted students were inconvenienced by having to leave the computer lab to refresh their college debit card. Although seemingly minor, the participant explained this often occurred in the middle of printing an exam or finishing a project just before class. An empty card meant shutting down the computer, gathering personal belongings, and seeking out a debit machine two floors away. She proposed a machine outside the lab to avoid this hassle.

Other participants offered more wide-ranging solutions. A staff member in one building often noticed lost students wandering the halls. This prompted her to advocate for a help desk in the new building on campus. Another worker detected high withdrawal and failure rates among students who were late-adds. She brought the data to the attention of her dean, suggesting a review of the current policy. Similarly, a financial aid staffer initiated policy change after successfully solving a complicated problem for an individual student. Each new idea promoted excellence throughout the institution.
Staff Satisfaction Level with Student Interactions

When asked to characterize their satisfaction level with student interactions, classified staff members focused primarily on positive encounters. However, when asked directly, participants reported numerous negative exchanges. Further reflection revealed job requirements that reduced the quality of communications. They also hinted at a personal toll exacted from demanding exchanges. Although contributors maintained an overall positive view of student interactions, they acknowledged areas of potential improvement.

**Positive encounters.** Research participants considered working with students as the most satisfying aspect of their job. As one contributor exclaimed, "I would go crazy if I didn’t have that opportunity. Put me in a back room and I wouldn’t be here!" Staff members related many positive exchanges, as detailed throughout the findings. The most affirmative encounters generally involved a successful student outcome, such as resolving a financial aid issue or congratulating a student on high placement scores.

The researcher noticed participants became especially animated when they spoke of helping a student achieve a specific academic goal. One library worker explained, "I really love it when I am helping a student and I see that they get it. They understand how they can get to a particular article." Another administrative assistant spoke of enjoying a "feeling of accomplishment, like you’ve really done something." Several contributors reported variations of students coming by to say "you helped me, I got an A!"

Students also initiated positive interactions in response to previous communications. Staff members received various tokens of appreciation, including personal thank you notes, cookies, and small gifts. One member recalled a student
bringing her orchids while she was battling cancer. Another received a gift card for her new grandson, addressed to the baby so as to avoid a job conflict for “grandma.” Participants reported carefully balancing the college gift policy with sensitivity to the student gesture.

Staff members also recounted experiences that created a mixture of positive and negative reactions. One contributor rejoiced at having a student she nominated accepted into Who’s Who. She was reportedly thrilled to be his guest at the recognition dinner and to continue contact after graduation. However, years later, the student continues to ask for assistance, a situation she believes has gone “above and beyond” her position. Conversely, a library assistant recalled a particularly rude student who she asked to leave the library. Several days later, the student returned to sincerely apologize for her behavior.

Interestingly, job responsibilities initiated the final example of mixed encounters. One front-line worker told of substituting for workers during lunch at a busy business center. She experienced pleasant interactions when serving students at the business office window. However, minutes later, the same students would present a “grumpy” demeanor when paying for parking passes. When she pointed out the contradiction to students, most did not even realize they were dealing with the same staff member!

Staff members reported the most positive interactions with recurring student encounters. Volunteer and work study supervisors developed meaningful student relationships; often continuing contact long after the student left the college. One person referred to “feeling like family” with his group of volunteers, while another supervisor spoke of “developing more of a support group atmosphere.” The collaborative
atmosphere also extended to faculty, creating a comprehensive learning environment. One staff member took great satisfaction knowing students did not feel threatened in these surroundings.

Negative experiences. To explore this aspect of staff to student interactions, the researcher asked, “what annoys you most about students?” Participants expressed surprise or hesitated to respond. As one person replied, “I never look at it that way.” At times, the researcher rephrased the question as “Is there a time when you do not feel students appreciate your work?” One contributor reviewed the question aloud, mumbling “not appreciated?” and then, after a pause, claimed “not too often.” Despite initial reluctance, respondents were able to directly provide examples of unsatisfying student interactions. The researcher also identified difficult encounters from other responses.

Classified staff members considered dealing with rude students the least satisfying aspect of their job. Some believed rudeness stemmed from changing characteristics in the population. Current students were described as “very flippant” and “often ungrateful.” Others attributed student behavior to the situation, referring to “the disappointment of students,” “misinterpretations,” or the fact that they are “very, very busy.” Participants also acknowledged their position attracted some of the negativity. An assistant to one of the top administrators explained her office deals with students after all other options have been exhausted. By then, the students are “usually irrational.” Overall, front-line staff members agreed “we get the complaints.”

Although participants cognitively rationalized the challenging encounters with students, they also admitted the exchanges were emotionally difficult. An administrative assistant alluded to the personal impact when students refuse to accept her policy
explanations. She claimed “everyone wants to talk to the dean,” with the assumption that students were thinking “who are you?” Another contributor expressed confusion and frustration when students are “thankful in person and then go complain to the dean.” Similarly, one worker seemed bothered by student reactions to paperwork requirements. She justified her position stating “I am only giving the information, not creating the need!”

One contributor acknowledged an underlying feeling of “being taken for granted.” He described coming in Saturdays on his own time to enable working students use of lab equipment. After several weeks, they began to take advantage of his efforts, complaining if he was late and ignoring his requests to clean up at closing. He finally discontinued the practice. Another staff member suggested comparable feelings, maintaining students sometimes take advantage of the fact that “I lean toward the trusting side.”

**Job requirements.** The researcher identified several job requirements that impacted the quality of interactions. Participants revealed some concerns while relating personal experiences; other aspects became apparent during observations. Multi-tasking created the most obvious effect, preventing staff members from giving students full attention. Institutional policies and training needs produced more subtle influences. Staff members seemed cognizant of the impact and expressed concern about the negative influences.

**Multi-tasking.** Participants cited increased student enrollment and lack of adequate staffing as the primary reasons for “multi-tasking overload.” Respondents expressed a desire for more division of duty as they struggled to manage students, files, and phones at the same time. One staff member described a typical situation in which
she begins entering budget data into the computer, a student comes in with a question, the phone rings, and a faculty member passes her desk calling out “I’ll be in the restroom if anyone is looking for me.” She explained “if you cannot multi-task, you cannot work here.” Although workers recognized this as part of the job, they also acknowledged that the split focus lessened the quality of all their work, including their interactions with students.

Staff members also discussed the challenge of balancing the ideal with the reality. One contributor praised his dean for mandating “your priority for the day is what walks through the door.” He promoted a “student-first focus” declaring “the learning environment is paramount.” Nevertheless, there is “an abundance of work and not enough staff.” This comment prompted another group member to exclaim “I need another person, I can’t do anything, take on any new projects, there is no time, I am working weekends and at home.” A less emotional worker simply stated “I have to learn how to say no….and sometimes that is hard, especially to your supervisor.”

Although most participants agreed the workload was the primary hindrance, other contributors cited the work situation as the crux of the problem. One worker noted “there’s no block of time to get things done – we are always on the front-line.” Others longed for a quiet place to complete paperwork. “There’s no office space, no place to work,” complained one contributor. Staff members working in open areas declared “I want my own office.” However, recognizing that was unlikely, one assistant explained she put on her headphones and “I develop my own walls.” Participants with offices recognized they needed to control access, limiting availability by closing doors to complete paperwork.
Research participants explained how the problems associated with multi-tasking impacted student interactions. Splitting attention and limiting access were obvious detriments. However, less apparent was the resulting burnout that "translates to being less open to students." There were also indirect effects. Several staff members pointed out that inaccurately completed paperwork made for future negative interactions.

**Policies.** Contributors described numerous individual office policies that did not relate to the overall topic of classified staff interactions with students. However, participants did identify some over-arching policy considerations. For example, one front-line worker bemoaned the focus on statistics. She acknowledged the need for efficiency and accountability; however, she cautioned that "students are more than numbers." As she explained:

Right now we are in a phase of "show me the numbers." If you see 50 students a day you are a better worker than someone who sees 30. I disagree. ...Maybe I am a misfit here; but, I do not think the only standard can be how fast can you clear the room of people out there.

Another participant echoed this sentiment advising the administration to "move the issue off the numbers."

Another research participant addressed policy issues in his initial introduction. He immediately expressed frustration with providing quality customer service. He clarified his dilemma stating "I don't know who the customer is in my situation; is it the college or the student?" Further explanation elucidated a conflict between policy and practice. What he needed to do to produce a satisfied student customer was often contrary to college policy. The situation was further complicated when he upheld
institutional directives, only to have the decision over-turned by supervisors. He recommended increased direction and support for all front-line workers.

Overall, staff members cautioned policies should never “get in the way” of student interactions. One participant bemoaned the fact “logic is not prevailing;” while another claimed current guidelines were “not serving student needs.” Examples of space utilization and office hours backed up these claims. One contributor considered it “a matter of keeping it in perspective.” He went on to say “we are here for the students, not the other way around.” The researcher noted unanimous agreement that policies impact the quality of student interactions.

**Training.** Throughout data collection, participants referred to training requirements that impacted staff interactions with students. For example, contributors mentioned a need for on-going, timely education in specific skill areas, particularly technology and academic software. They also suggested increased cross-training to assure staff members understood how their job influenced the ability of others to perform their work. Although these suggestions did not involve actual student contact, lack of training indirectly produced a deleterious effect.

Classified staff members also expressed a desire for specific customer service training. One worker voiced concern about a less friendly trend among newer employees. Another participant more emphatically complained “there are a few people who are not really skilled in their jobs, and as a result, they treat students stereotypical – like they are dumb – like they are community college students.” The researcher did not observe poor communication skills among study participants; however, she did overhear some brusque responses to students from neighboring office personnel.
Personal toll. The stress of daily student encounters and conflicting job requirements exacted a personal toll on front-line employees. Workers spoke of “being pulled in many directions” and feeling there was “not enough to go around.” Others mentioned being “stretched too thin” and not having time to “grow and challenge” themselves. One contributor even admitted “sometimes I have headaches so bad, I just want to cry.” To cope with these issues, most subscribed to what one participant called “the survivor code.” That is, “we work it out, we take care of ourselves.” Still, the long-term stressors impacted their work with students. One employee explained dealing with “so many attitudes makes you feel like being less helpful.” Another contributor claimed “people get burned out, and then they can’t meet student needs.” Despite the negative aspects of dealing with students, staff members reported contentment in their positions. Those who chose to quantify their satisfaction level gave ratings ranging from 5 to a perfect 10. This included a 9.4, a 9 out of 10, and percentages from 50% - 70%. Overall, student interactions accounted for the high ratings. An instructional assistant explained the mixed messages stating the daily work frustrations “poof, go away with the students.”

Summary of Classified Staff Perspectives on Student Interactions

Front-line classified staff members believed their student interactions had an overall positive impact, including a long-term effect on retention. They thought their role in the educational process included building skills, providing encouragement, increasing engagement, and attending to administrative issues. They also claimed to support the college mission by promoting open access, student success, and institutional excellence. Despite negative encounters with students, policy concerns, and personal tolls, workers
reported being generally satisfied with their roles. They attributed this contentment primarily to their work with students.

Participants used vivid descriptions to explain their impact on students. One contributor said she thought of her work “like dropping a pebble in a pond – put one person at ease and they take that to the classroom and pass it on.” Another staff member admitted “it is kind of humbling keeping everything going for them.” He went on to say he thought of himself as “the match that starts the fire.” After further reflection, he revised his analogy, attributing the match to faculty. Rather, he saw himself as “the kindling….it burns up in the process; but, it sure can help their fire burn brightly.” His words seemed to summarize the overall classified staff perspective on student interactions.

**Classified Staff Knowledge of Students**

The third research question explored what front-line staff members know about the students they serve. The researcher divided the question into three subsections. First, she explored what staff members knew about the general characteristics of the current student population. The researcher then delved into more specific understanding, asking participants to identify student barriers to academic achievement. Next, she looked at what staff members expected from students and how students can better obtain information from workers.

**Understanding of General Characteristics**

Classified staff members demonstrated understanding of student characteristics, noting specific traits as well as demographic trends. Participants described a growing community college population, with increased diversity in age, ethnicity, experience, and
thought. They reported abilities ranging from developmental to professional levels, trending toward a more academically competitive student. Contributors attributed this movement to the poor economy and greater competition at the four-year schools. They noted specific differences among various demographic groups, particularly in more traditional-aged students. However, they also highlighted characteristics shared among all community college students.

**Traditional-aged students.** Classified staff members across all age groups used predominately negative terms to characterize the current group of traditional-aged students. Some considered the group too young and immature for college, often not understanding what is expected of them. Common descriptions included “entitled,” “distracted,” and “unprepared.” Conversely, some contributors credited recent high school graduates with being more academically able and more technologically savvy. Despite the contradictions, participants indicated they enjoyed working with this demographic group.

**Entitled.** Staff members provided examples of entitlement from various college offices. An administrator’s assistant described many students as having an attitude of “I am the customer and you are supposed to do whatever for me.” She listed several challenges during registration when students “want it their way.” Insisting on overrides, force-adds, and late withdrawals, the participant observed the same students failing classes and then whining about consequences. Other personnel described how students “shop for answers” until they find someone to say yes. One amazed staff member reported:

they will do it right in our division, which amuses me to no end, because
they walk up to someone sitting at the front desk, and then they’ll walk
to someone else... or, they’ll call back on another line, - it’s like gee --
do you realize we are sitting in one big room?

When students do not receive the answer they want, many demand to speak to a higher
authority.

Other examples of entitlement emanated from the financial aid offices and testing
centers. One employee registered surprise at how ungrateful students were when
receiving monetary help. She bristled when they asked “is that all I get?” The
participant was quick to point out, however, that many students do appreciate the money.
Similarly, not all students demanded individual consideration at the testing center.
Testing center personnel did report an increasing number of special requests, though,
especially among students with accommodations.

Front-line workers also described increased student complaints suggesting “I paid
good money for this class and I deserve to pass.” When confronted with reasons for
failure, they refuse to be accountable. One staff member mimicked the frequent excuse
“but nobody told me!” Some participants attributed the entitled behavior to increased
parental involvement. Another worker believed it was because “the current batch from
high school has never failed.” He went on to explain:

their parents and the schools will not let them fail. They get Fs and they still
pass -- how can that be? And so they come here and they get an F and they
say “how can I get an F?” -- and they don’t understand...they don’t expect to
fail...sometimes we have to let them fail.
Distracted. Participants were united in describing traditional aged students as more distracted than older learners. Contributors acknowledged all students were preoccupied with financial and personal concerns; however, they listed technology as the primary diversion for younger learners. One member marveled at the “wired” incoming high-schoolers, walking around with “these little gadgets in their ears.” Another worker noted they “were in their own little worlds.” He recounted several incidents of responding to student “hellos” only to find out they were actually on the phone. Some of the older participants acknowledged the practice seemed unnecessary to them. Of course, one worker mentioned her experience went back to “party lines,” and another employee recalled watching commercials on “proper telephone etiquette.”

The increased use of electronic devices presented new problems for front-line staff members. Librarians complained of loud cell phone chatter in the stacks, and testing center personnel worried about new ways of cheating. Participants also thought “plugged in” students wasted more time, particularly on Facebook. Conversely, one contributor offered a positive spin on the situation. She noticed students came to the computer lab to check email and Facebook, and then stayed to complete school work. She also thought consistent updates from Facebook motivated students to remain at the computer.

Unprepared. Compared to past populations and other existing age groups, staff members judged current traditional-aged students as less prepared for college. Unable to assess academic abilities, they focused strictly on social behaviors. Participants characterized incoming high school graduates as “loud,” “less considerate,” and “more immature.” One member elaborated by claiming they were “younger, but dumber…with no clue, no survival skills whatsoever.” Others believed younger students needed “more
hand holding” and wanted information “spoon fed.” Complicating these issues was a
sense they did not want to work. One office assistant reported being asked specifically
for “the easy teachers.”

Despite the need for increased guidance, staff members claimed this age group
“thinks they know it all.” The alleged arrogance is behaviorally exhibited as they “refuse
to listen,” only hearing “about 25%” of what is said. This inattention forces them to
come back later, requiring workers to “repeat information time and time again.” The
researcher detected staff frustration with these behaviors, increased by the charge “the
least prepared do the most whining.” Nevertheless, one contributor gleaned a positive
spin to the behaviors, suggesting younger students simply “expected more.”

Special populations. Research participants distinguished characteristics of
students from special populations. They noted differences among older learners,
particularly women, international students, and other under-represented groups. Some
related to the challenges of first-generation undergraduates; others empathized with
students who attended community college due to financial limitations. Although staff
members helped all individuals, they admitted going “the extra mile,” for those with
extenuating circumstances. The researcher noted several participants with interest in a
specific population. As discussed earlier, two members were focused on military
veterans, one worker reached out to African American males, and several employees
connected with international students.

Older learners. The researcher defined older learners as those individuals
beyond the traditional college ages of 18 – 22. Although the reported and observed
distinctions became more evident as learners aged, even those in their mid-to-late
twenties exhibited different characteristics than new high school graduates. Older learners encompassed both males and females; however, participants referred more often to the challenges of older women. Nevertheless, both genders struggled to attend school while meeting work and family commitments.

According to research participants, many older learners returned to school to advance their full-time jobs through academics. Others lost jobs and needed to develop new career skills. Staff members noted "empty nest" women returned to school after raising children. They also worked with divorced single parents who came back to secure better-paying jobs. Finally, contributors interacted with retired individuals committed to life-long learning.

Front-line personnel outlined three main challenges for older learners. First, participants supposed returning students were overwhelmed by college requirements, both inside and outside the classroom. They reflected on the daunting task of adding more work to already full schedules. Secondly, respondents noticed this group was more likely to be intimidated by the technology. A computer lab assistant noted, "it is usually not the hard things" that stump older learners; rather, she spent her time showing them "little things," such as how to store documents or use a flash drive. Finally, staff members thought older learners struggled to fit in with a younger college crowd.

Overall, contributors demonstrated understanding of senior students. As one worker explained "having done that myself, I guess I identify with them."

**International students.** Staff members recognized the unique challenges of students from other countries. Respondents believed language presented the greatest obstacle, making it difficult for foreign students to master both academic and social
situations. They acknowledged the difficulty of learning a whole new way of life, while simultaneously adapting to college. Participants agreed these trials were even more arduous without the daily support of family and friends. Financial restraints added to the scenario, especially for new immigrants who often “do not have the means or the resources to pay.” Overall, front-line staff members believed international students faced a daunting task to succeed.

Staff members praised the common behaviors of international students. Most commented on their generally strong work ethic. Other respondents thought foreign students were better listeners and more appreciative than native students. They did require more assistance with basic tasks, however, especially interpreting terminology on forms. Participants were also sensitive to cultural norms, such as differing parental roles and religious requirements.

One contributor acknowledged a need for heightened sensitivity, noting questions and policies sometimes unintentionally offend international students. For example, working in the testing center, she reported frequent challenges regarding the English as a Second Language placement test requirement. Some international students considered it “racist” or “judgmental,” charging personnel were “treating them differently.” She calmly handled these incidents, explaining native students take a similar exam. She also drew diagrams for the irate students, detailing how their path to graduation mirrored that of other students. Similarly, federal regulations forbid releasing academic information to anyone but the student. At times, international parents and translators objected to this policy. Staff members upheld the policy, providing additional explanation to all concerned.
**Under-represented groups.** Staff members realized students from under-represented populations faced unique challenges. Such individuals included military veterans, ethnic minorities, and first generation undergraduates. Each group encompassed a variety of backgrounds, making it difficult to identify specific characteristics. Nevertheless, respondents recognized them as “at risk” students. They endeavored to help these students “find a niche,” where they could relate to others with common interests or challenges.

**Veterans.** Research participants expressed concern and respect for military students, particularly combat veterans attempting to adjust to civilian life. One staff member explained, “what I am seeing now is the vets coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan…they have PTSD, anxiety and depression. They just came off the front lines.” He warned this population was an emerging group, estimating his student contacts increased from 75 to over 400 individuals in the past five years. He expects those numbers to climb even higher as approximately 70,000 troops return home under the planned drawdown. As a former combat veteran, the research participant understood the varied needs of this vast group. Nevertheless, he explained, “we are part of a group, and we all share something in common; we signed on the dotted line, and we served our country.” That participant worked tirelessly to secure a veteran’s lounge and start a veteran’s club on his campus.

Although other staff members did not share the experiences of veterans, they appreciated their service. One contributor expressed her admiration for military students with a little extra effort. She explained it was “kind of a respect thing.” For example, rather than sending them to another office, she would “make a few extra phone calls and
try to see it through.” The researcher observed other group members nodding assent as the staff member explained her position.

Ethnic minorities. The targeted institution had a very diverse student population, comprised of numerous ethnic minorities. Although research participants did not elaborate on each separate group, they expressed sensitivity for cultural differences. Some contributors voiced interest in specific populations. A bi-lingual staff member explained she routinely reached out to other native-speaking Spanish students. Also based on language ability, an Arabic-speaking worker connected with many Middle-Eastern students.

Efforts with ethnic minorities extended beyond language, however. For example, one participant took an active interest in African American males at her campus. Based on her reading, she considered this a vulnerable demographic group, with great untapped potential. Her observations revealed most group members were “on the fringes.” She recalled her efforts to strengthen the likelihood of academic success, by attempting to socially engage them. One day, entering the student lounge where they gathered, she announced “I need somebody to help, I can’t possibly carry this.” The direct request resulted in several students offering assistance. Once she established a connection, she continued to build the relationship by recruiting the students to post event announcements, move furniture, and attend specific functions. Along with a thank you, she offered t-shirts and water bottles for participation. Eventually, several group members initiated involvement, volunteering to monitor the lounge, and filling in for absent student workers. She recognized her progress was only a small step; however, she believed her attempt to engage this specific group was worthwhile.
First generation undergraduates. Participants drew from their own experiences to show familiarity with the challenges of first generation students. One staff member shared her story, elucidating the importance of giving first generation students a chance. According to the respondent,

I don’t come from a family that has much college background. I couldn’t afford to go to a four-year university like I wanted to...you know, Ivy League and all that...because I had the grades and everything, but we just didn’t have the money. I wasn’t ready to be away from my mom, a single mother. I was very attached to her, so I came here...it was the best decision I ever made.

Another contributor echoed this experience, musing “I could have probably stopped at a GED and been the best educated person in my family.” Contributors channeled these personal experiences into their work with current students.

Staff members considered lack of guidance the biggest obstacle for first generation students. Reflecting on her own past, a respondent explained college tasks were especially daunting “for people where I come from...where we haven’t been to college, the people you are related to haven’t been to college....where you grow up in an environment where people didn’t go to college.” She claimed “people just don’t have anybody to...sit down and go over the requirements of the program.” With that in mind, she made it a point to review college particulars with students. She acknowledged, “I’m no faculty advisor.” However, she justified her actions saying “I’m literate and I can pull out the catalog...and I can go over the list.” Although it seems simple, she claimed students “are so grateful” for the extra help. She explained the two-year schools are
"often your first opportunity to have a college experience." She claimed "I really got a lot out of this place," and believed it "had a lot to offer people who needed a step up."

**Similarities.** Participants delineated unique characteristics among groups of students. However, they also described similarities across all factions. One staff member was struck by the similarity of all students, regardless of age, background, or even time. He concluded this after returning to his alma mater for his reunion. There he observed "students hanging out...lockers with towels hanging...a male student hitting on a female student...and I said "things have not changed." Relating this experience to the present, he noted students still have "a range of dedication," with some doing the bare minimum and others giving their all. He also saw consistent creativity among students; although he judged current students as more "playfully creative."

Respondents recognized the uniqueness of students and saw similarities in their individuality. That is, each person seemed to have "quirks." For example, one front-line worker described a gentleman who would only deal with other male workers. Another worker recalled a student bristling when anyone walked behind him. Testing center personnel also noticed varying expressions of apprehension to the common experience of test anxiety. "Everyone has something they are dealing with," summarized one worker.

Despite being "very, very busy," contributors thought students shared a desire to be part of the college experience. They believed students across all age groups wanted to fulfill their experience grow, and develop. Others saw a need to connect, noting an increase in study groups and departments that substituted for a "home away from home." Shared needs and goals seemed to unite the student populations. Staff members simply concluded "everyone wants to be successful."
Barriers to Success

The researcher identified numerous barriers to student success embedded throughout protocol responses. Participants acknowledged obstacles as they described the need for certain skills or explained the value of each interaction. They also outlined specific challenges for special populations while depicting student characteristics. However, when asked to address barriers to student success, respondents highlighted different concerns. They categorized the main obstacles as lack of focus, personal issues, and institutional impediments.

Lack of focus. Front-line staff members cited lack of focus as a key impediment to student success. One contributor observed “those with a mission do great.” Conversely, students without a clearly defined goal seemed to struggle and fail. Respondents acknowledged some students needed time to develop career aspirations. Participants offered guidance when asked; however, they understood students had to overcome this barrier primarily on their own. They also reluctantly suggested “college isn’t for everybody.”

One instructional assistant elaborated on this issue. “I think the biggest challenge is thinking about what they want to do….in the future.” That is, “what can I do now to help me get where I want to be?” He also pointed out the reality of their situation, stating “careers and jobs…are tough…it is brutal, it is brutally competitive.” Unfortunately, he believed this challenge actually inhibited students from achieving success. He lamented, “a lot of times they should be living in the moment” to fully benefit from the academic experience.
Closely aligned with a lack of focus, is the belief that many students “are not at college for the right reasons.” Some simply “are not sure why they are here.” When questioned, students suggest they have nothing better to do. Participants cited confusion regarding life choices, lack of motivation, and difficulty finding work as factors contributing to this aimless pursuit of higher education. Other workers believed some students “have to be here,” either to satisfy parental demands or to avoid loss of insurance or benefits. Finally, staff members mentioned peer or societal pressure as possible reasons students attended college without personal commitment.

The fact students attended a community college also seemed to impact their focus. One worker recounted a presentation she gave at a local high school. She asked the group their perception of the school and an audience member responded “the last place you want to be.” Students apparently brought this attitude to campus, as other respondents heard students bemoan not going to “a real college.” In response, one contributor told a group of disgruntled students “this is a real college and what you do hear is going to matter at your next college.”

Participants acknowledged the stigma associated with two-year schools, noting many students are just putting in time because “they can’t wait to transfer.” However, respondents thought the stigma was slowly changing. According to one employee, “the old idea is that the community college or the junior college is the place where dumb kids go. That is not true anymore.” She went on to explain “less are getting into four year schools,” and “a lot of friends or classmates come here.” Nevertheless, participants acknowledged student attitudes about the school impacted performance.
**Personal issues.** Participants referred to “busy lifestyles” as one of the overarching reasons students do not succeed. The respondents described the obstacle in a variety of ways. Phrases such as “work/life balance,” “juggling,” and “full plate,” communicated the same theme. Each comment acknowledged the stress associated with maintaining a hectic pace. As one staff member noted “they are not unabashed about sharing with you all of the stressors in their lives.”

Underlying the demanding lifestyles was apprehension about money. According to respondents, students overloaded their schedules trying to maximize work hours and minimize time to graduation. Ironically, the busy lifestyles seemed to undermine their goals. One contributor commented, “sometimes the students have overload and they can’t see the forest for the trees.” Another participant spoke of “making them aware” of the dichotomy, and then “pointing them in the right direction.”

Daily encounters illustrated the problems caused by busy schedules. Financial aid personnel explained the consequences of missed deadlines, potentially forcing students to withdraw from classes. Testing center staff bemoaned turning away late comers. Although they realized the impact of a missed exam, workers were obligated to uphold college policy. Computer lab personnel described students going into “panic mode” when a printer doesn’t work minutes before a paper is due. The scenarios varied; however, workers throughout the college witnessed “very, very busy students” self-destruct.

Hectic lifestyles also impeded efforts to make connections, another identified barrier to success. A student worker recalled a young woman coming by her office looking for involvement. She pleaded “I just go to work and I go to school, but I really
want to meet people. I really want some interaction!” The research participant invited
the co-ed to several upcoming events and directed her to the college website for on-going
announcements. However, the employee mused “I think sometimes because of full-time
employment and families and so forth, they find themselves not having the relationships
they want to create.”

Staff members cite “staying motivated” as another barrier to success. They
suggested competing life demands and lack of involvement contributed to the challenge.
Workers tried to counteract those effects by suggesting time management strategies and
helping students set short term goals. The researcher observed one staff member
congratulate a student on completing required paperwork for the current semester. She
then immediately asked, “now what have you done to get ready for next year?” Later
that day, she advised another student on how to successfully deal with academic
probation.

Another worker sought to counteract the problem of isolation. Recognizing a
need, she garnered support from administrators, faculty, other staff, and students to
establish a campus Women’s Center. The grassroots effort connected all women;
however, it was particularly helpful to single mothers who rarely had time to mingle with
peers. Overall, contributors believed staff involvement was an important tool in keeping
students motivated. Although they understood the reality, they desired more time per
student.

Institutional impediments. Participants delineated general college practices that
hindered student success. The researcher focused on wide-ranging issues, rather than
suggestions specific to individual offices. Overall, respondents believed it was simply
too difficult for students to get through the system. Contributors acknowledged that all educational institutions had “moments of bureaucracy” and that students must learn “to deal with it.” Nevertheless, they believed complicated processes derailed student success.

Staff members cited tedious paperwork, complicated forms, and unreasonable delays as the main offenders. Respondents complained some changes enacted to ease the bureaucratic burden actually added to it. This seemed especially true with improvements involving computer-based applications. Contributors charged other requirements increased accountability while decreasing efficiency. Increased workload also contributed to the problem. One worker empathized with students “waiting, waiting, waiting” to complete tasks. She decried a system in which students needed “to go through a process that forcibly has them wait six weeks – eight weeks – because we don’t have the manpower.”

Participants recommended greater cohesion of services as a partial solution. They cited a need to increase meaningful communication among offices, at both the campus and college levels. This would reduce “student run-around,” thus decreasing overall workload. They also believed more contact would foster greater idea exchange, less inconsistencies, and higher efficiency. For example, one contributor stated she would simply like to know who the “go to” person was in each office. Contributors seemed united in wanting more interaction with colleagues. However, they emphasized the communication must be meaningful. Several contributors complained meetings seldom resolve issues. They warned “solutions take time.”
Staff Expectations of Students

Front-line classified staff members expected very little from students. The researcher noted fewest responses in this category. One respondent registered surprise at the protocol question, quickly internalizing the query. “Well, I know what I expect of myself,” she responded, “I hold myself accountable.” After additional prompts, the researcher received suggestions about student interpersonal relations and work habits. One contributor also provided a recommendation on how students could obtain information more efficiently.

Interpersonal relations. Staff members agreed they expected respect from students. They endeavored to show respect to students, and they wanted the same consideration. No one elaborated on how students could show respect; however, they noticed when students used common mannerisms such as “please” and “thank you.” One contributor also took umbrage when a student “thanked me to my face and then went and complained to the dean.” Her frustration suggested she would appreciate the respect of direct communication.

Respondents did not expect every student to be pleasant; however they seemed to value such efforts. One participant stated “I could be quixotic in saying that I would love every student to walk through the door with a smile on their face, and to greet me as well, and have a sense of humor, and know how to ask a pointed question...but, I think I am realistic.” Nevertheless, staff members responded when students did act that way. The researcher noted smiles and increased conversations when students responded in kind.

Participants wanted students’ full attention. They also wished they would simply follow directions. One exasperated worker lamented “you can explain to them time and
time again, the process, and then by the next semester they forget it again.” Despite
telling students to write down key points, she claimed they “kept coming back with the
same questions.” Participants agreed this applied to only a few students; the majority of
learners seemed focused on their administrative tasks.

**Work habits.** Front-line staff members expected students to “make the best of
the opportunity they are given.” One contributor considered this one of her “pet peeves.”
Her voice rose as she elaborated:

> They won’t apply themselves, you know. It frustrates me. It frustrates the
> student part of me, the employed part of me, the part of me that has children
> and grandchildren. It is like, you really have to step up – this is a wonderful
> opportunity – don’t throw it away.

Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating “I expect they should realize what a
deal they’ve got here.” He went on to praise the quality of the education and chided
students for not taking advantage of what was offered. Although he admitted his own
college attendance was not perfect, he warned current students “just because it is
inexpensive doesn’t mean you can blow off the classroom.”

Some respondents concentrated on specific work habits. One worker explained
she simply required students to “work on their assignments and be quiet.” A librarian
also requested quiet for other students to concentrate. A lab assistant wanted learners “to
take care of things because they are their tools” and “to make the best of what they’ve
got.” Contributors generally expected students to be respectful as they worked.

**Obtaining information.** In addition to interpersonal skills and work habits,
employees expected students to know and understand policies. Throughout data
collection, they outlined numerous methods of helping students gain “college knowledge.” All participants recognized the challenge of a complicated system and worked to simply the process. However, they wanted to see effort from students, too. They maintained it was each student’s responsibility to know the institutional requirements. In addition to the previously mentioned suggestions, participants recommended each new student attend a student orientation.

**Summary of Classified Staff Knowledge of Students**

Front-line classified staff members demonstrated a clear and comprehensive understanding of the current student population. They revealed trends among the entire student body, delineated unique aspects of special populations, and identified generally shared characteristics. Participants also elucidated student barriers to success. Respondents offered few personal expectations of students; however, they did note several desirable student behaviors. Finally, contributors recommended students attend new student orientation to gain information pertinent to their academic success.

**Thematic Analysis of Data**

The researcher thematically analyzed all responses for trends beyond the research questions. Her analysis generated five over-arching themes. The data revealed front-line classified staff members (a) provided a human connection for students, (b) offered students practical strategies, (c) specifically impacted students from special populations, (d) overcame challenging work situations to interact with students, and (e) desired more involvement in developing college policy. The themes do not represent individual opinions or behaviors. Rather, they characterize the full body of work reported and observed during data collection.
Human Connection

Classified staff members trumpeted the human side of their work in both words and actions. The researcher noted reference to the human connection in each interview and focus group. Some comments were direct, as one staff member spoke of “the extent that I can use a human connection” to describe her role. Other responses only alluded to the concept. For example, one participant explained classified staff members “can’t be afraid of people;” another contributor described her position as “high touch/high tech.”

Respondents acknowledged the importance of the human connection to themselves as well as to students. One worker contrasted her frustrations with paperwork to the fulfillment she received from interactions. She described students as “the line of humanity” that gave purpose to her work. Conversely, participants demonstrated how their personal touch lessened student dissatisfaction. One participant eased tension simply saying “I am so sorry you had to wait.” Another worker reduced anxiety by immediately presenting options to a student with low placement test scores.

Staff members articulated their commitment to the human connection by expressing fear of losing it. Comments associated with efficiency and technology prompted such concerns. One worker heralded the increased efficiency of communicating via email, but noted “you do lose the personal touch.” Another staff member supported increased accountability; however, she cautioned “students are more than numbers.” An older respondent lamented the technology trend, claiming there was already “less personal contact overall.”

Technology personnel shared similar concerns. A computer lab assistant described herself as a “techie;” but noted “it still it is nice to have a person to ask a
question.” She realized the technology was only beneficial if students understood how to use it. Another staff member explained “you can’t just be known as tech, or you’ve missed all there is.” She went on to encourage other workers to “be mindful of the sociological connection” and to “be in touch with the person.”

Research participants linked the human connection directly to student interactions. One staff member offered the student perspective, recounting greetings that began with “thank God, a real person!” Another worker pointed out the limitations of technology, explaining “the initial question the person asks is often not really what they need to know.” She maintained only a person could assess the underlying concerns. Respondents considered personal interactions essential to student success. A participant summarized the impact saying “the one to one is essential - you don’t realize it at the time; but, that is when little miracles happen.”

**Practical Strategies**

Front-line classified staff members offered practical strategies when they interacted with students. They answered specific questions; however, they also anticipated the next steps. Current students benefitted from knowledge staff members accumulated over time. Workers provided students with self-developed check-lists to assure timely compliance. They also offered suggestions to avoid common pitfalls. These strategies were crucial to financial aid transactions, course planning, and class registration. Overall, they assisted students in obtaining general “college knowledge” not available in books.

Participants helped students develop effective academic and life skills. These included time management, goal setting, and stress management. Personnel assisted
students with time management of specific tasks, such as efficient test-taking, to the more comprehensive concern of juggling a full-time course load while working and caring for children. Respondents also showed students how to choose courses over several semesters. The long-term planning, accompanied by short-term goals, seemed particularly useful to English as a Second Language (ESL) students, striving to complete requirements in a minimum amount of time. Finally, staff members modeled stress management with appropriate humor and positive affirmations.

**Impact on Special Populations**

Research participants interacted with all students equally, exhibiting no preferential treatment based on demographic characteristics. However, analysis of responses revealed classified staff members focused on particular groups of students. Groups specifically benefitting from classified staff interactions included (a) older students, (b) international students, (c) under-represented ethnic minorities, and (d) veterans. Subgroups within the populations garnered special attention, such as the staff member who singled out African American males as a high risk ethnic minority. Other subgroups overlapped categories. Respondents listed special concerns for women in both older and international populations. Although first-generation undergraduates were not identified as a separate group, staff members realized they spanned all categories.

Motivation for targeted interactions varied. Some participants forged connections with special populations based on personal experience. For example, one worker from another country empathized with new immigrants. Other respondents reached out to student groups based on need. Technology personnel zeroed in on computer unfamiliarity associated with many older workers. Another respondent combined
experience with need, concentrating his efforts on disadvantaged fellow combat veterans. The reasons for the special attention varied. However, data consistently revealed beneficial interactions between classified staff members and special populations.

**Work-place Considerations**

Respondents indicated numerous work place issues impacted the quality of their interactions with students. The concerns were categorized as work space, workload, policies, and training. Staff members provided numerous examples within each category. For example, inadequate and open offices comprised work space issues, with participants alleging an inability to concentrate. These matters, coupled with inadequate staffing and mandatory multi-tasking, created a non-supportive work environment. Contributors also listed inconsistent policies and inaccurate information as frequent frustrations. Training needs created some of these issues and complicated other concerns. Overall, staff members indicated work place concerns reduced satisfaction levels and negatively impacted student relations.

**Involvement in Policy Development**

Classified staff members indicated their perceived lack of involvement in policy development affected the quality of student interactions. The researcher first discerned this underlying message during data collection. Respondents expressed gratitude at the opportunity to participate and thanked the researcher for conducting the study. Data analysis confirmed the message, revealing participants' desire for more involvement, recognition, and appreciation. Some comments focused on personal affronts; however, contributors offered evidence their ideas could contribute to student success.
Participants expressed frustration their experience was not valued. This emotional underpinning was evident as one worker explained “you selected me to work in this position for you, but then you make a policy before even asking how is this going to affect you?” Another worker echoed the sentiment explaining “I was kind of upset. One of the reasons I was hired was because of my experience...and they didn’t even use me in the process.” Although they believed front-line staff members kept the college going, they claimed “little input” on current practices. In fact, they considered their participation “an afterthought.” One worker questioned “do they think only people with higher salaries have good ideas?” Although the topic involved personal reactions, staff members focused on the work situation. One contributor urged mutual exchange saying “here’s what I’m facing, let’s find a solution.”

Summary of Thematic Analysis

Analysis of study data generated five over-arching themes related to the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. Participants discussed the importance of maintaining human contact with students in this increasingly technological world. They also helped students achieve academic success by offering practical strategies and providing additional support for special populations. Respondents revealed work place concerns they considered detrimental to quality interactions. Participants also requested more involvement in developing useful practices and policies.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore classified staff interactions with students from the perspective of classified staff. The researcher explored three research questions through individual interviews, observations, and focus groups. She
began by examining typical interactions between classified staff and students. Next, she analyzed the data to determine how these exchanges influenced student encounters. The researcher then explored the classified staff perspective, examining inconsistencies between how classified staff members view their interactions and what they actually do. Finally, she investigated what staff members knew about the students they serve. Data analysis also generated five over-arching themes pertinent to student interactions. The researcher reported all findings according to research questions, with a separate section summarizing the thematic analysis.

The first research question asked how front-line classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting. Data analysis revealed staff interactions with students encompassed a wide range of content and complexity. The communications also ranged in length from a single exchange that took a few seconds to multiple communications extending years after graduation. Characteristics of individual interactions did not impact quality; however, staff behaviors influenced the encounters. The researcher identified several skills that increased the likelihood of positive student interactions.

The researcher explored how important interactions were to front-line classified staff members in the second research question. Participants recognized the importance of interactions with students and believed their encounters had an overall positive impact. They outlined their role in the educational process, highlighting contributions in skill building, encouragement, engagement, and administrative tasks. They also promoted the college mission by supporting open access, student success, and institutional excellence.
Staff members reported being generally satisfied with their roles. However, they expressed concerns with negative student encounters, policy issues, and personal tolls.

Front-line classified staff members demonstrated knowledge of the current student population, the focus of the third research question. They listed shared student characteristics and identified unique traits of special populations. Participants also demonstrated awareness of student barriers to success. Although respondents did not require much of students, they clarified their description of acceptable student behavior. Contributors also recommended students attend new student orientation to gain information pertinent to their academic success.

The researcher exposed five over-arching themes related to the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. First, front-line classified staff members provided students with a human connection. Secondly, they offered all students practical strategies for success. The third theme highlighted additional support provided for special populations. Next, respondents elucidated how work situations can impact student interactions. Finally, participants requested more involvement in developing useful practices and policies.

Chapter IV provided responses to the three research questions, along with findings revealed through a thematic analysis of the data. Chapter V provides a discussion of these findings, beginning with the research methodology. The researcher then offers insights related to participant backgrounds, the research questions, and overarching themes. This is followed by a discussion of unexpected results from the data, and an overview of how the findings related to existing literature. The final sections include
implications for practice and recommendations for future research. The researcher then
summarizes the entire work with her concluding remarks.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The community college mission is to provide open access to post-secondary education (Vaughn, 2006). Unfortunately, low retention and graduation rates indicate access is not enough (Bailey, 2005; Morest & Bailey, 2005; Yang Su, 2007). In response to these statistics, community colleges are undergoing a gradual paradigm shift from open access to student success. Leaders, recognizing students must first stay in college to achieve that success, are seeking new strategies to retain students. This study sought to identify one potential strategy leaders could employ to increase the likelihood students will remain in school and achieve success.

Retention research suggests colleges must strategically identify aspects of the student experience that counteract negative influences and work to increase positive retention factors (Fike & Fike, 2008; Walters & McKay, 2005; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Some studies emphasize the importance of interactions on retention (Bean & Eaton, 2002; Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 2007). Other works focus on the impact of the college environment (Christman, 2000; Craig & Ward, 2008; Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006; Schuetz, 2005; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). Since front-line classified staff members permeate the entire campus environment, their interactions with students encompass both specified areas of retention research. Therefore, the researcher focused on classified staff interactions with students as a potential retention strategy.

Although existing research suggested a comprehensive approach to retention, the literature review did not reveal a specific focus on classified staff members. This study
explored how front-line support staff members contribute to this comprehensive approach. The work began with a premise that positive student experiences increase the likelihood of student persistence, which in turn increases the likelihood of student success (Astin, 2006; Bean & Eaton, 2002; Tinto, 2007). The immediate goal of the work was to better understand the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. The ultimate goal was to identify ways to enhance these interactions, thereby improving the student experience.

The findings elucidated the role of classified staff members in the educational process. The data also revealed ways to develop that role. This chapter begins with a discussion of the research methodology, presentation of findings, and impact of design limitations. Next, the researcher considers the findings related to participant backgrounds, the research questions, and over-arching themes. She then reviews what unexpected results emerged from the data, and how the findings related to existing literature. The chapter concludes with implications for practice, recommendations for future research and a summary of the work.

**Discussion of Findings from Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore classified staff interactions with students from the perspective of classified staff. The researcher collected data for this in-depth approach through individual interviews, observations, and focus groups. These three data sources provided data triangulation and saturation. Data analysis began with reflection immediately following each data collection section. The researcher then transcribed each protocol and coded the data using a locally-developed
coding system. She reported all findings in aggregate to assure confidentiality. This section provides a discussion of this methodology.

**Qualitative Paradigm**

The qualitative paradigm was well-suited to explore a topic with little available information (Patton, 2002). This approach required an open mind and suspension of pre-conceived notions. The researcher allowed participating classified staff members to tell their story. She did not try to confirm her own beliefs. Rather, she gathered information from specific experiences and used the data to draw general conclusions.

Several insights emerged from this approach. For example, prior to data collection, the researcher did not consider the role of classified staff members as a human connection to students in an increasingly technological world. This theme materialized solely from the participant responses. Similarly, respondents explained several ways staff shortages, multi-tasking, and inconsistent policies led to negative student experiences. The qualitative paradigm also increased researcher knowledge of the participants. As the classified staff members told their stories, they recalled rich and diverse backgrounds unrelated to their current positions. Their past experiences elucidated their unique perspectives regarding student concerns.

Specific qualitative techniques, including probing questions, active listening, and first-hand observations, improved understanding of the initial data. One participant spoke of her goal to “never see a student again.” Although the comment initially sounded negative, additional questioning clarified her desire to provide students with thorough service to prevent repeated office visits. Several members became immersed in their own stories. A careful summary of the tales generally brought the participant back to the
original point of the answer. The researcher also observed behavioral nuances, including sighs, voice tone, and facial expressions, which conveyed additional response information. Comments regarding louder speech or pursed lips invited members to express the underlying feelings associated with responses. Similarly, the researcher observed hand gestures, eye contact, and body postures that impacted the quality of staff to student interactions. These data would not have been available with a strictly quantitative approach.

Multiple Case Study

The multiple case study design involved an in-depth exploration of the topic through five cases within the bounded system of classified staff members at the targeted college (Creswell, 2007). The researcher recruited participants from three of the six campuses at the institution. Although the campuses shared the same central mission and administrative guidelines, each campus possessed unique characteristics. Specific ethnicities, age groups, and academic majors shaped the diverse campus scenes. Staff members also experienced variety in campus leadership and local training opportunities. The researcher considered these discrepancies during data analysis; however, further research is needed to assess potential influence of the differences.

Individual interviewees. The researcher proposed identifying front-line classified staff from job descriptions on file in the central Human Resource office. However, the approving authority denied that access. Therefore, the researcher asked provosts from the three targeted campuses to assist in identifying classified staff members with direct student contact. With their permission to contact all classified staff members,
the researcher assembled an appropriate applicant pool. She then chose five case study participants based on a sampling procedure of maximum variation (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher achieved maximum variation with respect to location and job title. Participants represented each of the three targeted campuses, and five different classified staff positions. However, due to a limited volunteer applicant pool, the sample did not reflect maximum variation of gender, ethnicity, and age. The five cases consisted of four females and one male. An additional male participant would have improved sample variation. There were three Caucasian workers, one black employee, and one Hispanic staff member. The ethnic breakdown represented all variations from the applicant pool; it did not represent the total diversity of college personnel. All participating workers were between the estimated ages of 30 - 79 years old. Inclusion of workers closer to traditional-aged students would have enhanced the sample. The impact of these individual variables cannot be assessed with the current data; however, the differences in classified staff member demographics merit additional exploration.

Focus group participants. Applicants from the original pool comprised the base of each focus group. Issues with distance, funding, and availability eliminated several members, necessitating the use of snowball and opportunistic sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The researcher recruited several group members based on recommendations from already-identified research participants. Although this emergent design flexibility (Patton) is an accepted strategy, it must be considered during analysis. Participants are likely to recommend new recruits who are comparable in position, viewpoints, or other defining characteristics. For example, one focus group had two members from the same office. Some of their responses were similar, referring to
the same workplace concerns. The researcher was careful to recognize this when coding
repetitive responses.

**Data Collection**

The research design employed individual interviews, observations, and focus
groups for data collection. The individual interviews consisted of three sessions: (a) an
intake consultation, (b) a formal in-depth interview, and (c) a final debriefing discussion.
Observations occurred between the in-depth interview and the debriefing session. The
researcher observed each interviewee in one session at the individual worksites. Three
focus groups, representing each of the targeted campuses, provided additional staff
perspectives. This section discusses logistical issues, research protocols, and individual
considerations associated with the three data collection methods.

**Logistics.** The researcher met with unexpected logistical considerations during
data collection. Issues with timing and recordings created the need for flexibility, while
participant availability challenged the scheduling process. Although none of the concerns
derailed the research design, they merit discussion. Future investigators might consider
these matters prior to launching a study. However, qualitative researchers should be
prepared for the dynamic nature of this approach.

**Timing.** Each participant received estimated time commitments for each portion
of the study. Interviewees expected a 15 minute intake interview, a 90 minute in-depth
interview, and a 15 minute debriefing. Focus group members also planned on a 90
minute session. The sessions exceeded all time estimates. The 90 minute projections
were off by as much as 30 minutes; the 15 minute approximations were half the needed
time. Strict adherence to time estimates would have reduced the amount of rich, detailed
data. Rather than abruptly end the session, the researcher acknowledged the exceeded
time limits and offered staff members an opportunity to end the meeting. All participants
chose to continue participation. Longer time estimates and greater interviewer control
could have avoided this error.

Data recording. The researcher used three methods to document interview and
focus group data. She securely filed data from each method in separate areas, assuring
access and confidentiality. A Sony IC Recorder ICD-SX700 served as the primary
recording device, backed up by a Panasonic tape recorder. Written notes provided a third
data format. Each method proved worthwhile. The Sony Recorder provided clear voice
recall and flexibility in playback. However, one entire session was inexplicably erased
from the machine. The outdated Panasonic tape recorder saved the voice tones,
emotional inflections, and side comments from that lost session. Despite the advantages
of the voice recordings, some verbal utterances proved indistinguishable. The written
notes clarified several ambiguous comments. The researcher recommends exercising
similar caution for all qualitative inquiries.

Scheduling. Scheduling conflicts are an inherent part of any work involving
multiple individuals. Nevertheless, quality research demands attention to this issue. The
researcher avoided scheduling problems with individual interviewees by working within
their constraints. She clearly outlined her own availability, and then allowed participants
to choose time and place. Focus group scheduling proved more difficult due to
coordination of several schedules. The dilemma warranted a systematic approach. First,
the researcher solicited possible times from selected participants. Next, she coordinated a
time and place that accommodated the most people. After confirming the session with
the available respondents, she contacted those who were not included. Some individuals rearranged their own schedules to attend the meeting; others were forced to decline participation. The researcher then used snowball and opportunistic sampling (Creswell, 2007) to complete focus group membership.

**Protocols.** Protocol questions stemmed primarily from the literature review, researcher observations, and data taken from the pilot study (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011). Before launching the current project, the researcher conducted three student focus groups to gain additional input. Students in each group paused before offering any examples of positive interactions with classified staff members. Respondents often nodded in agreement to the initial example, or told of a similar encounter. However, when asked for examples of negative experiences, group members recalled numerous interactions. They also had many suggestions for improving skills among classified staff members. The focus group input supported the existing protocol questions and did not add any new information. Further research is needed to understand the disparity between the positive and negative responses.

The researcher planned to inform the protocols by reviewing job descriptions for classified staff at the central Human Resources office. However, the approving authority at the targeted institution did not approve this measure. Personal reports from staff members substituted for this review. Potential participants provided a general job overview during the intake interview and an account of position responsibilities at the beginning of each individual interview and focus group session. The researcher noted any inconsistencies between self-reports and existing information, then clarified the discrepancies with the participants. The differences were minor and attributed to
individual office procedures. This consistency indicated the change in methodology did not affect the research findings.

**Interviews.** The three interview sessions for each participant required a total time commitment of approximately two hours. Interviewees chose their own session time and place. Three participants secured a private space away from their desk. Two contributors preferred to remain at their work-site, enabling them to simultaneously perform their assigned duties. The researcher reminded interviewees of their right to privacy and offered to return at a more convenient time. However, both participants insisted they were comfortable with the setting. Since the meetings were purposely scheduled for quiet times of the day and week, distractions were minimized and did not interfere with the interview process.

The researcher asked participants to explain their job responsibilities at the beginning of each interview. She then asked a series of background questions, including inquiries about educational accomplishments, past professional, and interest in community colleges. The goals of these early questions were twofold: to establish rapport and to better understand the staff perspective for subsequent answers. The protocol then addressed student interactions. The researcher focused on positive encounters first, and then explored less satisfying experiences. She concluded the interview with an opportunity for participants to share information not covered in previous responses.

The researcher noted patterns in the interview process. Participants seemed at ease talking about job responsibilities, speaking with confidence and without hesitation. Responses to job questions were detailed and longer than most other answers. The
researcher also noted participants used that opportunity to reveal their priorities. For example, one participant shared her commitment to providing a human connection with students, and then went on to tie subsequent answers to this original thought. Another participant introduced the importance of teamwork, a theme she continued throughout the interview. The respondents concentrated the majority of response time on their personal concerns.

Contributors were less verbal in discussing their personal backgrounds. Several staff members held advanced degrees, earned noteworthy awards, or worked for well-known organizations. Nevertheless, respondents only mentioned academic and professional accomplishments after the researcher used specific prompts. She attributed this hesitation either to the fact the accomplishments did not relate to the current position or the participants were not used to talking about themselves. Additional research on participant background as it relates to current job performance could elucidate ways to more fully utilize these hidden talents.

A response pattern also emerged with student-related questions. All participants recounted positive student encounters, and most contributors recalled at least one memorable student. However, the individual interviewees struggled to provide examples of less satisfying interactions. When asked “what annoys you about students?” one participant simply rejected the notion stating “I don’t know that there is anything that annoys.” Another contributor replied, “well, that’s a hard one because I ...never look at it that way.” Although each interviewee responded with at least one annoyance, answers to this question were less involved than other responses.
The lack of annoying reactions was surprising considering the high number of student interactions. Respondents could truly be pleased most of the time. However, closer analysis of all responses suggests a higher level of irritation than contributors were willing to share. This could be attributed to a lack of trust between the researcher and participant. Conversely, contributors might be assuming a "good subject role" (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003; Orne, 1962) in which individuals involved in a research project attempt to please the researcher and confirm the assumed hypothesis. The tendency to primarily voice positive thoughts, however, could also be due to a lack of awareness. Participants might not acknowledge the underlying frustration suggested in some responses. Finally, wording could have impacted responses with workers feeling uncomfortable calling students "annoying." Future researchers should consider each of these possibilities when exploring negative attitudes among research participants.

Focus groups. The researcher conducted three focus groups, one on each targeted campus. Each group meeting exceeded the estimated 90 minutes, for a combined total of approximately six hours. Although qualitative research recommends six to ten members for optimum focus group composition (Patton, 2002), only one study group met the minimum requirement. Scheduling conflicts, distance between campuses, and voluntary participation forced the other two groups to proceed with only five members. Participating members were verbal, engaged, and generally on-task. Each group had a minimum of one quiet and one dominating member. The researcher recognized these patterns and worked to involve all participants. The combined group exchanges yielded 54 single-spaced pages of transcription with all members contributing. The data yield suggested the smaller group size did not adversely affect data collection.
Focus group protocols followed the same question pattern as the individual interviews; however, the researcher noted both similarities and differences in the response pattern. Similar to individual interviewees, group participants began by expressing personal concerns when describing job responsibilities. One participant explanation of front-line responsibilities expanded to a detailed soliloquy regarding customer service. Another contributor concentrated her time on the need to develop social opportunities for students. Group members were also reluctant to tout their own accomplishments, requiring additional prompts to discuss personal achievements. These trends reinforced the need for further investigation in these areas.

Focus group members were more forthcoming than the individual interviewees regarding dissatisfaction with student behaviors and interactions. Participants promptly responded to the question by providing examples, echoing frustrations, and elaborating on shared negative experiences. For example, a comment regarding a "self-entitled" student initiated several additional stories of demanding learners. The researcher noted this "chain effect" during analysis. It is unclear whether comments within the group simply primed other memories, or if participants encouraged one another to acknowledge difficult situations. This trend could impact staff morale and is worthy of further study.

Observations. Observations lasted approximately six hours each, for a total of 32.5 hours. Four of the five observations concluded in one session; however, participant illness interrupted the fifth meeting, necessitating a second visit. The single session design met approval guidelines from the targeted institution. The observations provided 50 pages of sketches, notes, and reflections, enabling triangulation of the research data.
The researcher considered observer impact, session characteristics, overall duration, and location feasibility during data analysis.

**Observer impact.** The researcher approached each observation with consideration and respect for the participant, non-involved office staff members, students, and other concerned individuals. She collected data as a complete observer, assuming a non-participant status (Patton, 2002). Existing research warns qualitative researchers to expect some level of observer impact on data collection (Creswell, 2003; Patton). The researcher noted behavior changes attributed to the observation. The level of influence varied by individual, with all behavior changes decreasing with time.

All observed participants exhibited behaviors not expected during a routine work day. At the beginning of each session, they served as hosts to the researcher, assuring her needs were met. They focused on explaining their procedures, offered apologies for errors, and provided additional information regarding duties not observed. They also initiated research-related comments; reflecting on previous interview questions and discussing the on-going experience. In each case, behavior changes decreased with time. Participants became convinced the researcher was comfortable and stopped offering assistance. They also exhausted the need to explain job actions or earlier comments. Finally, as the daily workload increased, the staff members focused more fully on their duties.

The observation sessions also changed office dynamics. For example, the researcher’s use of existing space and furniture created logistical adjustments in three offices. Although colleagues were gracious in providing space, she noted several inconveniences due to her physical presence. Non-participants also did not have a full
understanding of the procedure. A brief introduction and study overview erased some mystery; however, most office workers seemed unsure of proper procedures. Several workers apologized for interrupting the process, even with routine work requests. Only one worker approached a research participant with a casual comment. Contributors confirmed this was atypical workday behavior.

*Session characteristics.* Single session observations minimized workplace disruption. Space accommodations for the observer and introductions to non-participants occurred only once, saving time and effort involved with repeated visits. Similarly, once participants adjusted to being observed, behaviors normalized. Subsequent sessions would have introduced additional adjustment periods. Conversely, several shorter sessions on separate days would have provided a more diverse snapshot of each workplace and worker. Participants reported activity levels changed throughout the week and the semester. The researcher was unable to assess behavior changes during different conditions.

*Overall duration.* A review of existing qualitative research revealed the duration of observational data collection varies widely. For example, anthropological researchers invest months or years observing participants, relying primarily on their experience to fully understand a topic. Action researchers plan relatively short observations, aimed at answering specific questions. Both extremes can meet the research objectives. According to Patton (2002), the ideal duration depends on the purpose of the study and the research questions. He elaborates on this guidance with a historical tale, claiming duration:

...follows the line of thought developed by Abraham Lincoln during
one of the Douglas-Lincoln debates. In an obvious reference to the difference in stature between Douglas and Lincoln, a heckler asked, “Tell us, Mr. Lincoln, how long do you think a man’s legs should be?” Lincoln replied, “Long enough to reach the ground” (Patton, p. 275).

In other words, observations must last long enough to accomplish the research objectives. Observations conducted for this study provided data to answer the research questions and triangulate information gathered from individual interviews and focus groups. Single six-hour observation sessions adequately met the research objectives.

**Location feasibility.** Three of the five work sites were spacious, providing ample room for observation. The researcher began each observation in an unobtrusive place, with direct view of staff interactions with students. She gained additional perspective by moving to other work areas during the session. The fourth observation occurred in a small cubicle with only one option for the observer. The close proximity of staff member, student, and researcher created a different dynamic among participants. The researcher maintained the role of complete observer; however, students were more aware of her presence. The final office was crowded and busy, forcing workers to maneuver around the observer. The primary observation post provided a full view of all front-line staff members; however, the researcher focused on the study participant. Although the spacious sites provided a more comprehensive view of the interactions, all observation sites were adequate for data collection.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began when the researcher reflected on her experience at the conclusion of each data collection session. She reviewed her notes, recording thoughts
and insights for future consideration. The researcher then transcribed the responses from each protocol verbatim, keeping track of spontaneous thoughts and ideas as she worked. Next, she analyzed data using a locally-developed coding system. Code analysis of three data sources provided data triangulation. A dwindling need for new codes indicated data saturation. Finally, the researcher used both the codes and her own reflections to uncover themes.

**Reflection.** Reflection is a distinctive human quality that enables us to construct knowledge from diverse information sources. Social interactions, such as interviews and observations, provide basic facts; however, emotions influence perception of those facts. Reflection incorporates the objective information with the subjective emotion-based experience to form a comprehensive understanding of the situation (Stanford-Blair & Dickman, 2005). Therefore, the researcher began and ended data analysis with reflection. The on-going process took place formally during data collection and coding, and informally while the researcher was driving, showering, or performing other daily tasks. As the researcher mulled over the data, she made connections, considered possibilities, and gained insight into hidden messages. This essential qualitative procedure enabled the researcher to understand the classified staff perspective beyond the documented field notes (Patton, 2002).

During each data collection session, the researcher recorded her own reactions, insights, and impressions in the protocol margins. Immediately after each session, she reviewed the entries, considered how her initial thoughts related to the overall experience, and determined whether her reactions agreed or differed with previous encounters. Her musings increased understanding of both the process and content of data collection. For
example, reflection elucidated the tendency of individual interviewees to minimize negative experiences, as compared to the more vocal focus group members. Personal contemplation also highlighted the importance staff members placed on initial contacts.

Another benefit of reflection was quality control (Patton, 2002). The researcher used post-session reviews to clarify individual responses. When she uncovered ambiguous areas, she contacted the participant for immediate clarification. She also used her reflections to guide the observations. Although she approached each observation with an open mind, the initial interview analysis enabled her to identify connections between the responses and the observations. Finally, the researcher used early reflections to adjust subsequent sessions. Notes from the first focus group indicated an awkward process as members stated their names and job responsibilities in separate round robin responses. Simply combining the first two questions enhanced the flow of later groups. Similarly, the first focus group process revealed a need to more fully incorporate quieter group members. The researcher accomplished this with an increased use of round robin responses in later groups.

**Coding.** The researcher began the coding process by transcribing each protocol verbatim. She noted all comments and utterances, including half-sentences, pauses, and laughter. This detailed transcription provided an accurate rendering of each session. The researcher then assigned codes to each response. Early, broad-based codes became more specific as categories formed. Final codes reflected precise concerns embedded in individual responses.

The coding process enabled the researcher to systematically triangulate data, a recommended strategy to check for accuracy (Creswell, 2003) and increase credibility
Triangulation serves to cross-validate findings by assessing the convergence of multiple sources or data collection procedures (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). After coding all comments, the researcher compared and contrasted responses to each question among the five individual interviewees. She then evaluated interviewee responses in relation to focus group replies. Finally, she assessed congruency between all verbal responses and individual observations. Data that converged across all three sources was found to be sufficient (Wiersma & Jurs) to answer the research questions.

Inconsistencies among the three methods did not necessarily negate the findings, however. Rather, novel comments or observations offered additional insight into this complex topic.

Coding also indicated data saturation for each research question. Analysis of the first interview protocol produced numerous codes and sub-codes. As data coding continued, comments increasingly reflected existing codes. No new codes emerged during analysis of the final protocol. Participants used different words and examples; however, they communicated the same broad ideas. Although a sample will never capture every possible insight from a total population, the decrease in new codes indicated data collection elicited the most salient responses in each category.

**Emergence of themes.** The exploratory nature of qualitative research allows for unexpected discoveries. Three research questions guided this study; however, participants offered their own agendas. Thematic analysis began as the researcher created a list of codes unrelated to the research questions. As analysis progressed, she began to see similarities among the codes. The researcher then reflected on the related codes to identify the themes. She included five themes as findings directly related to
understanding classified staff members interactions with students. Tangential themes also increased understanding of the overall classified staff experience; however, the impact on interactions was not apparent. These ideas are reported later in this chapter as unexpected findings. Additional research is needed to understand the implications of these topics.

**Presentation of Findings**

Confidentiality issues created challenges in the presentation of research findings. This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to examine how classified staff members perceive the impact of their interactions on the student experience. The approach involved an in-depth exploration of the issue through five cases within the unified system of front-line classified staff members at one institution (Creswell, 2007). Responses from three focus groups triangulated the data. The primary goal of the multiple case study design was to show more than one perspective on the issue (Creswell); a secondary goal was to do justice to each individual case (Patton, 2002). The researcher remained faithful to both goals during data collection and analysis. However, presenting individual cases would have compromised the identity of the participants. Therefore, the researcher chose to report all findings in aggregate, ensuring no identifying information was included in the final report.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The researcher identified several limitations and delimitations in the original research proposal. She attempted to minimize the effect of these restrictions during data collection. When that was not possible, she contemplated the impact during data analysis. This is evident in two limitations emanating from the research design.
The in-depth nature of the multiple case study approach dictated a small sample size. The researcher used a maximum variation sampling procedure to provide diversity within the small group. However, the researcher could not control observer impact during observations. Therefore, she considered the influence when assessing the data.

Delimitations stemmed from specific design decisions. The use of all voluntary participants alleviated coercion and increased the likelihood of motivated and honest contributors. The majority of the volunteers seemed to be motivated workers with a sincere desire to help the institution. Their responses and behaviors demonstrated a positive and appropriate attitude. The associated findings, therefore, reflected a "best practices" model for front-line classified staff members. Conversely, some staff members seemed invested in forwarding a personal agenda. Although their ideas were informative, the researcher considered the singular focus during analysis.

The researcher also concentrated only on the staff perspective of a two-person interaction. This prohibited a comprehensive understanding of the exchanges. Nevertheless, it served the purpose of the study: to explore classified staff interactions with students from the perspective of classified staff. Within that restricted focus, participants were not given any background information for the project. Their perspectives might have changed in response to existing literature or student feedback. Additional research is needed to address these possibilities, as well as other perspectives. More detailed recommendations for future research are discussed later in this chapter.

Finally, the researcher must address personal bias. Qualitative analysis challenged the researcher to be reflexive; that is, to be self-aware and own her perspective (Patton, 2002). This reflexivity was essential to her authentic data analysis
and report writing. The researcher decided which comments to emphasize, what themes emerged, and how the findings related to the research questions. She did this with a strong appreciation for the work performed by classified staff members, formed through personal experiences and academic research. The researcher believed an honest portrayal of their perspective would do them the greatest justice. Toward that end, she painstakingly focused on collecting objective data, triangulating findings, and tracking her own feelings during the process. She also used a professional researcher to debrief data collection sessions and provide feedback during data analysis. Nevertheless, she acknowledged her personal respect for this group of workers during the final evaluation of results.

**Discussion of Content Findings**

Data collection yielded a wealth of information concerning the impact of frontline classified staff interactions with students. The researcher discusses these findings in the following section. She begins with a review of participant backgrounds, revealed through introductory protocol questions aimed primarily at establishing rapport. She then presents insights and recommendations spurred by findings associated with each research question. An examination of the five study-related themes follows, along with an overview of some unexpected findings. The section concludes with a review of how the study findings related to existing literature.

**Participant Background**

The researcher began each interview and focus group session with questions designed to establish rapport and provide insight into the participants’ perspectives. The strategy exceeded the established objectives as responses elucidated a variety of rich and
diverse backgrounds among staff members. Detailing life experiences seemed to remind participants of their own accomplishments, providing them confidence in their roles as research contributors. The questions also had the unintended consequence of connecting colleagues in the focus groups. Long-time co-workers expressed surprise at one another's similar life experiences. Overall, the questions generated a wealth of data for use in this study and future research with classified staff members.

**Education and experience.** Data analysis revealed varied educational and professional backgrounds among study participants. Education levels ranged from associates to masters degrees, with several participants beginning their post-secondary education at a two-year institution. Professional experience also reflected a strong connection to community colleges, particularly the targeted institution. The 21 participants represented 203 years of work at the school. Other professional experiences included positions in business, information technology, government, military, and religious services.

A closer look at participant background data revealed several staff members achieved education levels beyond current job requirements. Others worked in jobs that did not utilize their professional expertise. The academic and professional background of these classified staff members is possibly under-utilized and under-recognized. Faculty and administrators are often considered ideal candidates for student mentoring, training, and advising. The accessibility of front-line staff members, combined with their strong professional backgrounds, could provide another viable resource for students. Community college leaders should explore possibilities within this available talent pool.
when planning new programs, providing career guidance, or developing new student success strategies.

**Attraction to community colleges.** Research participants acknowledged practical considerations contributed significantly to their reasons for working at a community college. As one contributor simply explained, “I needed a job.” However, functional motives did not dominate the staff members’ conversations regarding their community college attraction. Rather, respondents spoke at length about more philosophical motives. Early comments reflected a sincere desire to help others, especially from those who related to the first-time community college student. The most expansive answers detailed their satisfaction with the educational environment. Some staff members specifically enjoyed student interactions; others reveled in the many forms of diversity. All participants agreed the dynamic atmosphere of a college campus added to their job satisfaction.

The philosophical responses reflect differing agendas. Younger staff members focused on wanting more than a job. They spoke of enjoying the creativity involved in an academic atmosphere, the opportunity to learn new things, and their satisfaction with the autonomy the school offered them. Older workers were more apt to admit they started at the college for practical reasons; then, more idealistic reasons kept them there. Despite complaints of low pay, under-staffed offices, and sub-par workspaces, many workers remained at the college throughout their careers. Staff members attributed their longevity primarily to satisfaction with helping others and being part of student success.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore classified staff interactions
with students from the perspective of classified staff. The specific goals of the study were to (a) clearly identify how classified staff members interact with students, (b) gain understanding of how classified staff view these interactions, (c) distinguish best practices among classified staff members when interacting with community college students and, (d) ascertain which procedures seem to inhibit effective interactions. The study also sought to provide classified staff members with an opportunity to express their views on their role in the educational process. The following research questions guided the research:

1. How do front-line classified staff members interact with students in a face to face setting?
2. How important are interactions with students to front-line classified staff members?
3. What do front-line classified staff members know about the students they serve?

Participant responses and behaviors answered the research questions and fulfilled the goals of the study. The following sections discuss the data in relation to these research questions.

**Research Question 1.** The first research question explored the content and process of classified staff interactions with students. The researcher examined the range of content, degree of complexity, and extent of student interactions with staff members. Findings confirmed the interactions varied widely in all three areas. The researcher also sought to identify the most effective interpersonal skills used by classified staff members as they performed their varied duties. Participant responses and behaviors illuminated
ten specific abilities essential to workers in these positions. Findings from this question provided insights that can be applied in daily college proceedings.

**Content and complexity.** The study found classified staff members interactions with students all have the potential to impact the student experience, regardless of actual content or degree of complexity. The front-line staff members are part of the student experience from first to last contact, beginning with admissions, continuing throughout matriculation, and extending beyond graduation. Their positions make them the “face” of the college, as they are the people students encounter when they come on campus.

**First contacts.** The very first contact a student makes with the institution can determine whether or not the individual continues to pursue enrollment. The reception students receive when they enter an office can set the tone for the remainder of the visit. The participants seemed to understand the importance of these first encounters, specifically listing student greetings as part of their job responsibilities. They also recognized that college campuses can be confusing places for students. Several participants emphasized their work in pointing students in the right direction, physically shepherding them to the next stop, or offering assistance to a lost individual in the hallway. Their roles as “keepers of the building” and repositories of general information were important aspects of their work.

Participant attention to greeting students and offering assistance stemmed primarily from personal and professional experiences. Participants recalled their own hesitancy when starting college, at times remembering those who helped them conquer their early fears. Others recognized their ability to set the tone of an exchange, realizing the value in establishing rapport before enforcing policies or delivering unwanted news.
Their comments and behaviors reflected more than experience, however. The staff members were compassionate to students, one of the ten essential skills identified in the findings. They demonstrated empathy with the student experience through voice tone, eye contact, and energy levels. Students responded to their genuine concern and understanding with smiles, expressions of thanks, and repeated visits. Employees can learn to greet students with a smile, respond promptly to requests, and practice active listening; however, the mechanics might not be enough to engage students. Rather, findings suggested students require employees who truly care about them.

Routine requests. Front-line classified staff members are called upon daily to answer numerous routine requests, especially during peak office times. For example, enrollment personnel repeatedly explain the difference between credit and non-credit classes during registration, while deadline dates become the mantra for financial aid representatives as cutoffs draw near. The information is well-known and monotonous to workers; however, it is new and important to each student asking the question. Routine requests comprise a large segment of classified staff interactions with students. Therefore, the researcher carefully examined how these inquiries were handled at the targeted campuses.

The data revealed three insights that apply to routine requests. First, participants emphasized the important role they play in providing a human connection to students in an increasingly technological world. The researcher observed employees dealing with repetitive questions by posting related information on office signs or referring students to the college website. Although the efficiency of these practices suggests continued use, the loss of human contact must be recognized and addressed. Secondly, respondents
explained some students are so confused by college bureaucracy they do not even know the correct questions to ask. Routine requests can be a means to initiate contact with personnel. Personnel need to recognize this opportunity and assure students understand the total process in question. Finally, staff members indicated constant repetition of information fosters frustration and boredom. Employee awareness of this strain could enhance personal well being and improve the quality of student interactions.

Complex considerations. The study data also elucidated information related to front-line staff interactions involving complex situations. Participants reported challenging encounters that were content-specific, such as those involving financial aid awards or veteran's benefits; and behavior specific, including irate students or cheating incidents. The complexity of these exchanges required increased amounts of staff knowledge, time, and support. It also created a need for more training, staffing, and communication. Unfortunately, the findings were in conflict. The time required for situations that required more training actually prohibited staff members from getting that training. Nevertheless, deficits in any of the identified areas inhibit the ability of staff members to adequately deal with complicated issues. Leaders must find ways to adequately address training needs.

Extent of interactions. The researcher sought to understand the extent of staff interactions with students with respect to number, length, and level of involvement. The greatest range of data appeared with number interactions, showing a range from six to 400+ encounters per day. The lower range, however, was rare; most participants reported frequent interactions with students. Although there was no comparative data, the high numbers likely impacted length of interactions as well as level of involvement. Increased
interactions also related to participant complaints with staffing issues and the need for increased multi-tasking. Budget constraints combined with increasing enrollments make it unlikely the numbers will decrease in the near future. However, any serious focus on the quality of staff interactions with students must address this issue.

Findings associated with level of involvement highlighted the potential importance of every interaction and every staff member. Routine encounters provided personnel with opportunities to engage students when they least expected it. Participants recounted memorable student interactions that started when they shared an elevator, provided directions in a hallway, waved in the cafeteria, or stopped by the student lounge. Some examples were extra-ordinary, involving serious emotional and financial issues. These unplanned exchanges suggested a dynamic quality to the everyday interactions between students and staff members that should be recognized and emphasized in training programs.

The level of involvement in purposeful, planned interactions was also noteworthy. Classified staff members invested time and energy working with volunteers and work-study students. Staff comments and student actions indicated a symbiotic relationship between the two participants. The researcher considered these interactions in relation to the rich and diverse participant backgrounds. Increased attention to match staff expertise with student interests could enhance interactions and foster meaningful student engagement.

**Effective skills.** The researcher identified ten effective interpersonal skills from participant comments and behaviors. Findings indicated front-line staff members should strive to be: respectful, approachable, good communicators, patient, compassionate,
sensitive, detail-oriented, knowledgeable, student-centered, and happy. This list provides a blueprint for training workshops. Employees can increase their job-specific knowledge, use check-lists to assure attention to detail, and follow customer service guidelines for respect, effective communications, and student-first service. However, closer examination revealed some of the essential skills cannot be easily taught. Compassion was discussed earlier in relation to greeting students and offering assistance. Being approachable, patient, sensitive, or happy are also difficult skills to teach. Thus, the list offers guidelines for hiring and placement of front-line staff members. Not all employees will possess all skills, nor will they demonstrate all skills all the time. Nevertheless, findings indicate leaders should seek these skills in front line personnel to enhance the quality of staff interactions with students.

Research Question 2. The second research question investigated the importance of interactions with students to front-line classified staff members. The researcher considered the perspective of classified staff members in three categories: (a) their role in the educational process, (b) their role in the college mission, and (c) their satisfaction level with student interactions. Findings showed a strong relationship between the first and second categories. As expected, front-line administrative duties directly supported the educational process and ultimately the college mission. While this finding was expected, it cannot be disregarded. Skillful and knowledgeable execution of these duties is essential to student success. However, the findings also elucidated less obvious support staff contributions. Participants contributed to the educational process through skill building, encouragement, and engagement. They also specifically supported the college mission with respect to open access, student success, and excellence. Overall,
participants expressed contentment with their student-related roles. Nevertheless, negative encounters and unrelated job requirements lessened satisfaction with student interactions and contributed to unhealthy personal tolls on workers.

**Role in educational process.** Front-line classified staff members seemed aware of their part in the educational process; however, comments suggested they minimized their contributions. Although one respondent touted her role as “huge,” most workers spoke more modestly of doing the “little things” or “whatever needed to be done.” The researcher sensed participants believed their jobs were important to student success; they just did not, or could not, specifically identify their contributions. Without this awareness, it is unlikely staff members specifically focused on improving student success.

Increased awareness of the educational role would likely enhance classified staff interactions with students. Findings indicated participants sincerely believed in the importance of their work. The study also showed staff members unknowingly contributed to the educational process. The combined findings suggested staff members would likely refine identified actions to increase the likelihood of student success. With increased awareness, personnel could relate individual actions to specific student-success goals. Their current, unplanned behaviors could also become more deliberate and purposeful. Additionally, staff members could more clearly define their individual roles, supplementing the original targeted behaviors. These changes would likely enhance the overall quality of staff interactions with students, leading to a more positive student experience.
Building skills. Data analysis revealed front line classified staff members helped students develop both academic and personal skills. Concrete skills were primarily technology-oriented or focused on dealing with the academic bureaucracy. The more abstract skills focused on organization, planning, time management, and goal setting. The observed participants provided guidance in accordance with institutional procedures. However, several contributors relied solely on their personal experience for information. The researcher realized the potential problems associated with this scenario. Staff members certainly help students develop beneficial life skills; however, without realizing it, they could also pass on detrimental habits. Therefore, front-line workers must be properly trained and work closely with all other college factions to convey both a comprehensive and consistent academic message to students.

Staff members can attain consistency with concrete academic skills through specific communication with faculty. Participating instructional assistants are already doing this. These workers explained how several methods could often provide the same end result. However, since the use of multiple approaches would likely confuse new learners, they endeavored to keep methods consistent between the classroom and labs, frequently communicating with faculty to assure this occurred. The same level of consistency was less apparent in student centers. Students from many different disciplines and classrooms shared the same computer labs and libraries. Staff members, therefore, were more likely to follow their own preferred approach, rather than that of a specific faculty member. This increased the likelihood of students receiving inconsistent information. Focused communication between faculty and front-line staff members could decrease these discrepancies and provide students with more consistent instruction.
General life skills, such as time management, organization, planning, and goal-setting were also influenced by individual staff member preferences. Participants generously shared their own life lessons, providing students with approaches that proved personally successful. However, their experience might not translate well to another lifestyle. Variables such as family situations, economic concerns, personality, and resources could prevent students from achieving the same success. In worst-case scenarios, students could actually be steered in the wrong direction, causing them to waste precious time and resources. Therefore, front-line staff members, along with all college personnel, should only promote consistent, pedagogically-sound strategies that have been subjected to scholarly research and peer review. They should also be provided with approved references and community resources that are both current and reliable. Here again, increased awareness and proper training are essential to assuring consistency, and thus enhancing the quality of staff interactions with students.

Encouragement. The researcher found participants encouraged students by assuring, empathizing, motivating, and strategizing. Staff members assured students with matter-of-fact comments that they could indeed master the task at hand. They fortified students by listening to their struggles, and in some cases, sharing similar experiences. Personnel energized students with candy, smiles, and extra attention; and offered students strategies to overcome both personal and academic obstacles. Although staff behaviors varied, their actions served the same end goal: to help students succeed. Their actions were also similar in what they did not do: they did not relieve students of responsibility for their own success. Participants strongly maintained that students needed to be
empowered, not enabled. All front-line classified staff should understand this essential distinction.

*Engagement.* Closely associated with encouragement, front-line classified staff members also engaged students in the college experience. In fact, they used engagement to encourage students to persist in their academic pursuits. Participants spoke of the importance of creating “a college environment” and cultivating “a sense of community” for students. They recognized students needed to feel a part of the school to thrive. Their observations mirrored the premise of this study: a positive student experience leads to increased persistence and ultimately student success.

Data analysis suggested classified staff members were in a unique position to engage students. First, as previously mentioned, they permeated all parts of the college except the classroom. Their presence in every division, department, and office offered a unique opportunity to blanket an institution with the united message of increased student engagement. The opportunity only exists, however, if all staff members are aware and aligned with that institutional goal. Secondly, classified staff members often met students in relaxed, unhurried, and informal settings; ideal conditions to naturally engage students. Their job duties also invited engagement. Front-line positions required one-to-one communications, forcing staff and student to begin the process. Finally, support personnel served in relatively non-threatening roles. They did not hold decision-making power over students to the same degree as administrators and faculty members. Also, even though many front-line staff members held advanced degrees, their academic achievements were not associated with their positions. These considerations could make
support personnel more approachable than other college entities and should be considered in student engagement discussions.

Role in college mission. The findings showed evidence of classified staff support for the three major components of the college mission: open access, student success, and excellence. They embraced open access through community outreach and full acceptance of the diverse student body. However, their comments and behaviors suggested they understood open access was not sufficient for student success. Their focus on improving institutional policies and maintaining excellence promoted student success. Their emphasis on accountability also encompassed all three mission components.

A close examination of data reveals front-line classified staff members routinely held students accountable for their actions, regardless of personal circumstances. There were numerous examples of personnel going “above and beyond” job expectations to help a student; however, the researcher did not see evidence they were willing to circumvent regulations or make exceptions because of unexpected circumstances. This could be due to their limited decision-making capabilities. Even if staff members wanted to overlook a deadline or ignore a requirement, they realized improperly processed materials would not be approved. In this respect, the limitations of their positions assured equal treatment for all students.

Participants consistently adhered to policy, however, even when exceptions were within their means. Although their observed behaviors could be attributed to researcher influence, their comments indicated more philosophical reasons. Respondents spoke passionately about institutional excellence and the need to maintain high standards. They seemed most concerned with academic integrity, the college reputation, and providing a
quality education. They empathized with student challenges, but they did not accept hardships as excuses for lower standards. This could be due to their own experiences, especially as former community college students. Their ability to overcome adversity seemed to reinforce their belief in current students doing the same.

Staff members also recognized the impact lower standards had on all students. Participants cringed at the stigma associated with attending their institution and the perception that it was not a “real college.” They seemed saddened at the impact misconceptions had on current student attitudes. However, they also worried questions regarding quality would lessen the importance of the community college degree. Their consistent focus on high standards addressed these concerns. Overall, participants exhibited a clear understanding of how all students must embrace excellence to achieve true success. Their understanding of the importance of accountability is worth consideration by all college personnel.

Satisfaction level. Findings related to staff satisfaction level with student interactions provided numerous insights. The researcher expected high satisfaction levels with positive encounters; however, she was surprised at the extent of those encounters. Staff members described long-term, mutually beneficial relationships resulting from routine encounters. The depth and variety of positive interactions elucidated a staff to student dynamic that seemed largely unnoticed in the literature. Negative exchanges elicited predictably lower levels of satisfaction. Nevertheless, the researcher did not expect the nonchalant attitude toward the unpleasant encounters. Participants rarely reacted to disagreeable students; rather, they seemed to understand the frustrations. Their matter-of-fact attitudes and objectivity diffused potentially contentious situations.
Analysis of face-to-face encounters formed the foundation of this study. However, the findings also revealed how administrative job requirements directly influence staff to student interactions. Participants indicated their job responsibilities were slowly changing, primarily due to increased enrollments and decreased budgets. Staff members reported staff and space shortages often forced them to multi-task several duties in busy, cramped office spaces. Additionally, an intensified focus on accountability created a creeping “numbers only” mentality with respect to productivity. The increased tempo also impacted their training opportunities at a time they desperately needed to stay current with new technologies and procedures. Together, these factors exacted a personal toll on workers, and impacted the quality of staff to student interactions. The researcher noted how each issue directly affected the exchanges. However, data analysis revealed the mounting disruption from the combined factors. Their cumulative effect on daily staff duties suggested an unavoidably negative impact on the quality of student interactions.

**Research Question 3.** The third research question examined what front-line staff members know about the students they serve. The researcher primarily focused on general characteristics of the current student population and student barriers to academic achievement. Respondents demonstrated a wide-range of knowledge in these areas, detailing similarities and differences among the various student groups. The study also urged participants to describe their expectations of students and provide input on how students might better obtain information. Staff members struggled somewhat with the first part of the task, suggesting they demanded little of students. Nevertheless, with the
help of additional protocol prompts, participants outlined specific expectations that can be used to improve student to staff interactions.

**General characteristics.** Data related to student characteristics were extensive and detailed. Front-line staff members identified specific traits and growing trends among several diverse demographics groups. Earlier findings elucidated the extent and tone of staff interactions with students. Generally, the numbers of contacts were high and the casual interactions invited engagement. Findings in this area indicated the extensive interactions provided front-line staff members with unique opportunities to understand students. Their experience-based comments supported information from existing literature. This consistency gave credence to participant conclusions and highlighted the value of their perspective. However, they also noted characteristics particular to their own campus. Indeed, findings suggested front-line staff members are “the eyes and ears” of the college. Their input can provide valuable institution-specific knowledge of the student population.

**Traditional-aged students.** Participants provided contradictory data regarding traditional-aged students. Their predominately negative descriptions of students as “entitled,” “distracted,” and “unprepared” were countered with praise for their academic abilities and technology skills. The contradictions revealed relationships that could enhance staff interactions with students. For example, students are primarily distracted with technology, an area workers also highlighted as a strength area. Similarly, students are described as unprepared; however, personnel recognize strong academic abilities. The key, of course, is to use the identified strengths to minimize detrimental habits.
Although these findings do not provide the solutions, they provide an important first step by elucidating the relationships.

A thorough analysis of data regarding traditional-aged students must consider the age differential. Participants, ranging in age from mid-twenties to late 70s, provided consistent views of incoming high-school students, suggesting age did not affect their perceptions. However, older workers elaborated more in each area, possibly verbalizing an underlying confusion with what they observed. That is, all workers characterized traditional-aged students as more needy and demanding compared to other groups. However, it was the older workers who expressed surprise at the attitude and struggled to understand why these individuals believed they were so entitled. Similarly, the older workers marveled at the many gadgets younger students juggled, unsure how they concentrated at all. Although all workers noted the same behaviors, younger workers seemed to understand the habits better than the older workers. This distinction suggests younger workers could be a valuable resource for older workers and excellent mentors for incoming high-school students.

Special populations. Participant comments indicated a clear understanding of shared commonalities as well as unique differences among special populations. Staff members identified two over-arching characteristics of students regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, experience, or personal situations: (1) they wanted to fit in, and (2) they wanted to succeed. Respondents enumerated many more differences, specifically associating unique characteristics with specific special populations. For example, staff members generally described technologically-challenged older learners, isolated international students, and confused first-generation undergraduates. Although participants
acknowledged the individuality of students within each group, their comments demonstrated an understanding of common concerns.

Data analysis revealed staff members often empathized with students from special populations based on personal experience. Workers identified most often with women and older learners, a possible reflection of the participant demographics. Similarly, respondents who were first generation college students, or emigrated from another country, related to the corresponding student groups. These findings highlighted the potential for classified staff members to serve as student mentors and role models. Although the expertise is there, it is not currently being fully utilized.

Respondents also aligned with certain groups, showing preferences based on respect, interest, and familiarity. For example, one staff member focused on transitioning military personnel, a sub-group she greatly admired. Another worker concentrated on international students; although native to this country, she was simply fascinated by stories from different lands. Overall, personnel exhibited greatest satisfaction when working with preferred student groups. College needs and budgetary restraints would likely prohibit singularly focused front-line staff members. However, findings suggest increased attention to staff preferences could enhance student interactions and boost worker morale.

**Barriers to success.** The researcher noted barriers to student success embedded in all student-related responses. Specific participant responses identified a lack of focus, personal issues, and institutional impediments as the primary reasons students do not succeed in college. As previously outlined, staff members can work with students to identify individual barriers, set goals, and build necessary life skills. Nevertheless, actual
change remains with the student. College employees can alleviate the institutional impediments, however, with classified staff members leading the way. Although administrators and supervisors generally develop policy and procedures, the findings indicated front-line staff members are in the best position to evaluate the implementation and offer practical solutions.

Two institutional impediment themes emerged from the findings: (1) streamline procedures, and (2) increase communication. A closer examination of staff comments revealed an overlap in these themes. Descriptions of complicated processes were actually caused by lack of communication, and poor communication unnecessarily complicated procedures. The classic "student run-around" exemplifies this conundrum. Staff members reported sending students back to offices for signatures or other documentation, only to have workers in the first office deny knowledge of the requirement. Conversely, even when all workers were compliant with proper procedures, students reportedly had to visit multiple offices to achieve one administrative goal. Respondents wondered aloud how to increase efficiency; however, they admitted their lack of knowledge about other office procedures impeded a comprehensive solution. This overlap suggested increased communication could alleviate the related need for streamlined procedures.

**Expectations.** The lack of participant responses revealed as much about staff expectations of students as the verbalized comments. Simply put, front-line staff members expected very little of students. When confronted with the question, respondents initially hesitated, then provided unexpected replies. Staff members either denied preconceived notions, or focused on their own performance standards. These reactions indicated a strong student-centered job approach. Upon further reflection,
participants acknowledged they simply expected students to be respectful and to try. Promoting these basic behaviors would likely enhance interactions, improve staff morale, and increase student satisfaction.

**Thematic Analysis**

Five over-arching themes emerged from the interview, focus group and observation protocols. The researcher determined front-line classified staff members: (a) provided a human connection for students, (b) offered students practical strategies, (c) specifically impacted students from special populations, (d) overcame challenging work situations to interact with students, and (e) desired more involvement in developing college policy. Discussions for four of the five themes appear in other chapter sections. The research questions included information on practical strategies and special populations; the following sub-section on implications for practice examines work-related themes. This section focuses on the human connection.

Participants indicated the dual challenge of rising enrollments and dwindling budgets impacts the human element of staff to student interactions. Staff members noted information moved on-line to improve efficiency lacks any human contact, while overburdened office-based services result in little time for personal attention. They considered the human connection essential to student success and warned of potential consequences. Personal contacts helped identify student questions, clarified complicated situations, solved basic problems, motivated unenthusiastic learners, and engaged isolated individuals. Each related example related to an individual student achieving an academic goal. Well-prepared, technologically-savvy, motivated students are likely to succeed
with little to no staff contact. The findings indicated all others need a human connection with college personnel to achieve success.

**Unexpected Findings**

This study focused specifically on the impact of face-to-face interactions of front-line classified staff members with students. As the project unfolded, the researcher realized a comprehensive understanding of those interactions must consider the total staff experience. For example, participant comments revealed multi-tasking, open office spaces, communication issues, and increased work load directly impacted student interactions. However, contributors also shared unexpected insights that did not address the research focus. Nevertheless, the effect on classified staff members created an indirect impact on the student experience.

**Senior staff members.** Participants reflected on the changing face of their offices. Existing studies describe the “graying” of community college leadership, a trend that suggests large numbers of aging top level administrators are preparing to retire (Boggs, 2003; Shults, 2001). Participating classified staff members did not use this term; however, they alluded to similar movement among their own ranks. Respondents discussed the attitude of newer workers, noted increased competition for positions, and bemoaned a perceived lack of respect for their experience. Their responses revealed a growing trend that has the potential to impact community colleges in the very near future.

Impending retirements present several challenges to community colleges. First, senior workers possess knowledge of the institution that might not be well documented. Historical college information provides insight into current practices, builds a foundation for traditions, and fosters a spirit of continuity between former and current stakeholders.
Knowing and understanding the college history also helps current leaders avoid past mistakes. The oral histories available from aging staff members deserve attention and proper documentation.

Older staff members also perform their duties based on years of experience; not necessarily prescribed procedures. For example, they might know who to talk to regarding certain problems, how to quickly move forms through the system, what to say to a challenging student, when to react, and when to simply wait for things to settle into a routine. It is unlikely that any of this is documented; in fact, the staff members might not even realize their knowledge or skills differ from other workers. However, the cumulative effect of their experience is noteworthy and deserves some targeted attention.

Leadership. Front-line staff members also pondered the direct and indirect relationship of leadership to their work with students. Several participants alleged college leadership had a direct impact, detailing the importance of “a solid leader” at each administrative level. One staff member believed quality service to students started at the top, explaining “the administration sets the culture.” Another worker considered the intermediate layers, noting they are so “overwhelmed by bureaucracy” they “can’t give customer service.” A third respondent explained poor supervision at the office level resulted in frequent staff turnover. She proposed this is how “the ball gets dropped” on many student issues. Participants also charged leadership with indirectly impacting the quality of interactions. Staff members spoke of how a “disconnect with higher ups” prohibits meaningful change on the front-lines of service. One participant complained the message was “if it doesn’t affect them, just deal with it.” Others described a “top heavy” approach to policy and procedures that treated their input as an afterthought.
Investigating the veracity of these statements was beyond the scope of this project. However, the comments suggest leadership must be considered in any comprehensive review of front-line staff interactions with students.

**Work-place concerns.** The researcher also uncovered information not verbalized by participants. She was surprised to find workers interfaced on student issues, yet did not know one another. Focus group participants were pleased to finally put a face to voices they heard only on phone lines, or names they associated with emails. Others remarked at how long it had been since they last saw certain colleagues. Respondents noted it was “easy to remain in own department” and they were “too busy” to interact and inform one another. Staff members commented on the importance of a human connection for students; however, they did not recognize the potential impact on their own experience.

The cumulative effect of individual changes to staff positions provided another unexpected finding. Staff members routinely absorbed modifications to their positions with little impact on overall production. They noted handling a few more cases per day, hand reviewing applications instead of using outdated software, and filling out an electronic form instead of making a quick phone call. They also made routine adjustments within the office environment: new adjunct desks that decreased their space, a new co-worker who required extra guidance, or worn-out equipment that required daily maintenance. Findings indicated the individual impact was minor; however, the cumulative effect was noteworthy.

The creeping staff workload required participants to routinely complete paperwork at home. Although not part of the job description, they did not know how else
to get everything done. When faced with the quandary of attending to student needs or deadlines, one staff member explained she did her administrative chores "off the clock" because she could not take the students home with her. The individual toll was obvious. Staff members were weary of an unmanageable workload. However, the impact on the student experience must also be considered. Tired, overworked staff members simply cannot sustain quality interactions with students. Rather, they are likely to cut corners, fall behind, or quit. None of those options serve students well. Therefore, changes to classified job requirements must be periodically assessed for cumulative effects.

Findings Related to the Literature

This study sought to address a growing concern for community college students who do not persist long enough to achieve their academic goals. A National Education Longitudinal study found 20% of entering students never even completing 10 credits, and only 35% earning a degree, even eight years after their scheduled high school graduation (Bailey, 2005; Morest & Bailey, 2005; Yang Su, 2007). However, other studies elucidated variables related to a positive student experience increase the likelihood a student will stay in school and achieve academic success (Astin, 1975, 1999; Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006; Kuh, et.al., 2005; McClenny, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2007). Based on these findings, the researcher sought to identify a way to improve the student experience, with the goal of ultimately improving student success. Knowing classified staff members are part of that experience from enrollment through graduation, she chose to examine how their interactions with students impact the student experience.
A literature review uncovered scant work in this area. Thus, the researcher planned an in-depth exploratory study of these interactions from the classified staff perspective. She prepared for the inquiry by reviewing existing research, beginning with retention studies related to student and institutional characteristics. She then examined published works associated with the role of classified staff members. Scholarly research linked to interpersonal interactions completed the analysis. Following is a summary of how study findings related to the literature review.

**Retention studies.** The study premise assumed a positive student experience would increase the likelihood a student would stay in school. Therefore, this work began with a review of retention research. The researcher limited her focus in this extensive area to studies related to classified staff interactions with students. Information on community college student characteristics proved useful in understanding potentially different needs within the student population. Findings on institutional characteristics highlighted areas of focus related to policies and procedures. Together, the knowledge provided a solid foundation for this study.

**Student characteristics.** Participants echoed existing research claims regarding the negative impact certain student characteristics have on retention (Walters & McKay, 2005), especially among underrepresented student populations (Alford, 2000; Byrd & McDonald, 2005; Cunningham, et al., 2006; Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002; Fike & Fike, 2008; Green, 2007; Morest & Bailey, 2005; Walters & McKay). Although respondents did not elaborate on each separate group, they expressed concern for challenges faced by minority populations. One worker shared observations of black American males who seemed “on the fringe” of the college experience. Another foreign-born staff member
explained the challenge of adapting to a new culture, relating her own experience to that of current emigrants, specifically native-speaking Spanish students. Participants also voiced concern for "isolated" international students, suggesting a need for increased cultural sensitivity. Their observations supported earlier findings by Schmitt and Duggan (2011) indicating staff members believed such issues made it more difficult for minority student populations to succeed.

Front-line staff members also acknowledged obstacles for under-represented populations beyond ethnic boundaries. For example, participants recognized the challenges faced by first generation college students as they attempted to understand the college bureaucracy without benefit of parental guidance. Several respondents spoke from experience, having been the first in their families to achieve a college degree. Their comments corroborated literature findings explaining 45% of first-generation community college students (Bailey, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005) are not as likely to persist as incoming college students from well-educated families (Astin, 2006).

Contributors considered technology another barrier for students, especially returning women. Their experiences mirrored earlier reports suggesting female students were less confident with technology, and older students were less likely to embrace new computer-based applications (Regalado, 2010). Similar to earlier findings (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011), participants reported and demonstrated ways they assisted technology-challenged students; securing passwords, logging on to new computers, accessing databases, and trouble-shooting printer problems. Although many students utilized the computer labs (Abbott, 2004), front-line staff from several areas provided assistance.
Additional student characteristic research indicated lifestyle choices, such as working while going to school, (Bailey, 2005; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Rolph, 2008; Pascarella, et al., 2004), often forced students to take longer to graduate (Bailey), and decreased the likelihood of achieving academic success (Astin, 2006). Front-line staff members upheld these assertions with numerous examples of students struggling to maintain demanding schedules at school, work, and home. They explained students often attempted to maximize work hours and minimize time to graduation. However, the overloaded schedules generally proved unsustainable, undermining their ability to achieve their academic goals. Their insights came directly from overwhelmed individuals who were not “unabashed about sharing with you all of the stressors in their lives.” They also observed fallout from the overload, often assisting students with last-minute projects or correcting problems from missed deadlines.

**Institutional characteristics.** Research on institution characteristics found that persistence increases when students attend colleges whose functional environment benefits them (Christman, 2000). Study participants seemed to understand these findings as they discussed policy and procedure issues throughout the college. Overall, respondents believed it was simply too difficult for students to get through the system. They cited tedious paperwork, complicated forms, and unreasonable delays as the main impediments to student success. They also noted increased workload and insufficient staffing decreased the quality of college functions.

Workers acknowledged the benefits of a functional environment by looking for ways to make the college more “user-friendly.” One staff member suggested installing an additional card machine outside her office, eliminating the need for students to shut
down their computer when they needed to add money to print. Another worker ordered "Quiet, please" candies to respectfully maintain a quiet study environment. Staff members also advocated for student space, garnering support for a Women's Center on one campus and a Veteran's lounge at another site. These efforts demonstrated a strong belief in the importance of campus environment to student success.

Respondents seemed particularly supportive of research advising colleges to begin the process of student engagement during the first moments a student is on campus (Jenkins, 2006; McClenney, 2007). Participants considered "greeting students" an important part of their role, highlighting the activity and expanding on how the simple gesture invited student engagement. One member recounted the process in detail, moving from an initial hello to a long-term relationship with a student. However, workers also realized engagement efforts could not be confined to one-time only activities. Rather, front-line staff members recognized efforts to address student needs must permeate the institution and become established at each level of the student experience (Bailey, 2005; Davis, 2008; Fontana, et al., 2006; Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005). They provided numerous examples of working with students throughout the academic process, from pre-enrollment registration questions to post-graduation transcript concerns.

Participants also acknowledged the need for all parts of the college to work together and provide students with seamless integration of all services (Jenkins, 2006). Toward that end, participants called for increased communication among offices, at both the campus and college levels. They believed this would foster idea exchanges, minimize inconsistencies, and promote efficiency. Contributors posited more efficient and
streamlined student services would result in less student “run-around,” and greater student satisfaction. These insights suggested front-line staff members considered integrated services essential to student success.

An unexpected finding also elucidated the important role leadership played in assuring seamless integration. One staff member explained the quality of service to students started at the top, as “the administration sets the culture.” This aligned with findings from Rector (2005) elucidating the importance of college presidents managing and influencing the campus culture. However, participants also recognized the importance of leadership at every college level. One worker reported his immediate supervisor directed him to put students first; however, administrative requirements from higher authorities often superseded that guidance. This example illustrated how each sub-group plays a distinct role in the daily functioning of the institution (Gawreluck, 1993). It also highlighted the importance of each sub-group aligning with the mission and goals of the college to assure overall success of the institution (Locke, 2005).

Finally, participants agreed with existing literature that student success must be seen as a two-way street. Students must adapt to the institution; however, institutions must find ways to adapt to the student (Schuetz, 2005). Workers recommended students do their part by showing respect to college personnel, and putting forth the necessary effort to succeed. However, staff members also acknowledged current student challenges, including problems associated with rapidly advancing technology and increasing lifestyle pressures. Their verbal comments, along with their observed behaviors, suggested sensitivity to these issues, and a willingness to adapt to changing student needs.
**Role of classified staff.** The literature review uncovered only one study that specifically focused on the role of community college classified staff members in the educational process (Weidner, 2008). Nevertheless, researchers have long recognized the need for placing the right people in front-line positions. More than thirty years ago, O'Banion (1978) trumpeted the importance of a caring environment, while McClenney and Waiwaiolo (2005) more recently claimed it was imperative for community college leaders to hire people who have a genuine interest in the students. Findings from this study supported those recommendations. Participants discussed cultivating a "friendly, supportive environment" to alleviate student fears, and urged patience in dealing with tired, frustrated, and overwhelmed learners. Respondents also believed it was essential for workers to empathize with students and demonstrate genuine concern. They recommended sensitivity in all student interactions, recognizing many concerns are hidden from public view. Overall, contributors suggested front-line workers commit to being student-centered or move to a back office position.

The literature review revealed an expanding role for classified staff members beyond traditional administrative duties. Support personnel were called upon to track "at risk" high school students (Parry, 2008), become integral members of learning committees (Weidner, 2008; Williams, 2009), and perform limited counselor duties (Martin, 2004). Study participants corroborated this trend, with formal involvement teaching student development classes, mentoring volunteers and work study students, organizing events, and developing new programs. Informally, respondents encouraged, motivated, and engaged students in numerous ways beyond their assigned duties. These
findings, along with data revealing rich and diverse participant backgrounds, supported the need for expanded, not increased, front-line classified staff responsibilities.

Another consideration of the staff role related to literature findings involved the extent to which classified staff members aligned with the mission and goals of the college. Research indicated this alignment was important to job satisfaction (Hong, 2011), and overall institutional success (Locke, 2005). Since institutional success depends on student success, the researcher paid particular attention to this relationship. Findings showed numerous examples of front-line employees fully supporting the three primary components of the college mission: open access, student success, and excellence. Workers were proactive in reaching out to a diverse student population, assuring open access and equal opportunities for all. They demonstrated a commitment to student success by raising awareness about college opportunities, maintaining programs, tracking usage, serving as points of contact, recommending improvements, alleviating roadblocks, and assisting students with any reasonable need. Their commitment to excellence was evident in the high standards they upheld for themselves and the students they served. These behaviors directly supported the college mission, contributing to institutional and student success.

**Job satisfaction.** The researcher also considered how levels of job satisfaction impacted classified staff interactions with students. She first investigated how these levels affected staff retention, noting workers with more positive affectivity were more likely to remain at the college and engage in positive citizenship behavior (Barnes, 2010). Participants reported high levels of satisfaction, citing student interactions as the best part of their jobs. This is in line with an earlier study showing classified staff members
considered their actual work, especially with students, to be the most significant factor in job satisfaction (Hong, 2011; Schmitt & Duggan, 2011). They also mentioned appreciating the educational environment and their relationships with colleagues. High levels of satisfaction did translate to longevity, with the participant pool representing 203 years of service to the college, or an average of almost ten years per staff member. Two thirds of the staff members were there more than 18 years, and the three most senior contributors served over 30 years each.

Despite overall contentment and impressive retention rates, participants expressed dissatisfaction similar to that reported in published reports. For example, research indicated personnel issues such as staffing (Brainard, et al., 2008), salary (Hale, 2005), and professional development (Alfano, 1993; Banks, 2007; Huiskamp, 2008; O'Banion, 1978; Reece & Cooper, 1980) were not generally favorable to this group of workers. Staff members confirmed these impressions, referring often to the burden created by burgeoning enrollments and lack of staff. Similar to findings in a California study (Hong, 2011), participants acknowledged salary concerns, but did not elaborate on the issue. However, they did mention the need for more training, particularly in the rapidly changing technology area. As reflected in the existing research, they acknowledged low pay, an increasing workload, and a lack of training lessened their job satisfaction.

Findings on policy and governance were also aligned with the literature. Research revealed classified staff members desired involvement in deciding policy (Allen-Mendez, 2003; Christian, 1980; Sigmar, 1988; Ourlian, 1998;), and expressed more satisfaction with campus climate when given the opportunity to do so (Christian; Hong, 2011). Nevertheless, reports indicated support staff members are not well
represented in this area (Allen-Mendez; Christian; Lanning, 2006; Ourlian; Underwood & Hammonds, 1999). For example, one study showed only 31% of classified staff members were asked for input regarding changes in organizational structure and function (Underwood & Hammonds, 1999). Participant comments reflected similar concerns at the targeted college. Complaints of a “top heavy” approach to policy and procedures, along with impressions that staff input was treated as an afterthought, suggested workers had the same concerns today as those revealed in the literature more than thirty years ago.

**Emotional labor.** The final area regarding the classified staff role considered the impact of emotional labor (Grandey, 2000) on an employee. Researchers found strategies involved in regulating emotions for the sake of an institution can result in stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Chau, et al., 2009; Grandey). Front-line staff members confirmed this finding, reporting headaches, tearfulness, and fatigue, particularly after peak times. Respondents elaborated on the problem, admitting the stress of dealing with negative student attitudes made her feel “less helpful.” Echoing earlier research findings (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011), contributors highlighted the emotional drain of repeatedly answering routine questions. One participant explained “people get burned out, and then they can’t meet student needs.” Although staff members did not dwell on health problems associated with job stress, their occasional comments illuminated an underlying issue with the toll of emotional labor.

**Interactions.** There was a dearth of existing literature detailing the specific role of classified staff members in community colleges, especially in regards to student interactions. However, published works did address the topic in a general sense.
Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) considered positive interactions with college members outside the classrooms leading predictors of college retention. Conversely, Glogowska, Young, and Lockyer (2007) revealed two of the main reasons students gave for leaving college early were a lack of support and negative early experiences. Students in one study generally acknowledged validation contributes to their ability to succeed (Over, 2009); however, Latino students specifically attributed personalized experiences and validation from community college support staff as a contributing factor in their academic success (Villareal, 2004). A study by Schuetz (2005) also explained the importance of mutually beneficial relationships between college staff members and students. This study did not confirm or negate the published findings. However, reported and observed student responses to classified staff interactions indicated positive impacts resulted from the exchanges.

Participants spoke of encouraging students by assuring, empathizing, motivating, and strategizing with them. One staff member believed she encouraged students simply by letting them know she believed in them. Others disclosed their own struggles to students, assuring them current challenges were temporary. Workers also provided tangible encouragement, ranging from a simple candy treat, to a more involved offer to help clarify a challenging situation. Nevertheless, contributors were careful to make the distinction between encouraging students and enabling them. Rather, respondents echoed earlier findings emphasizing the importance of empowering students (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011).

Staff offered encouragement in many ways, and students responded with equally diverse expressions of gratitude. The researcher observed students smile, say thank you,
and bring workers small tokens of appreciation. Staff members also recounted how students told them they made a difference in their lives, either by writing letters or returning to campus to share their successes. The stories suggested a mutually beneficial relationship between the staff members and students. The testimonies also implied a link to retention, even though the research design did not allow for a definitive cause and effect relationship.

**Associated skills.** The literature review provided specific information regarding the mechanics of the interactions. Face to face exchanges between classified staff and students involved verbal and non-verbal components. Messages were sent with a verbal component containing the content of what was said (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). The non-verbal component included how it was said, revealing the emotion behind the words (Myers). The other half of the communication experience was listening (Goulston, 2010). Assessing all three components of the communication process was essential to understanding the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience.

The verbal component is generally considered to be more overt and straightforward, involving primarily the content of what is said. To verbally communicate effectively, experts explain it is essential to be knowledgeable about the topic at hand (Mumford, et al., 2000). It is then crucial to convey that knowledge in a respectful manner the receiver can understand (Novinger, 2001). The researcher observed classified staff members demonstrating all three critical components of verbal communication. They respectfully conveyed knowledge in each of their respective areas, drawing from experience and academic preparation. Their explanations were clear and concise, with no evidence of jargon or complicated wording. Staff members responded
to the few questions they did not know with offers to find the information and get back to
the student.

Non-verbal cues were found in body language, clothing, office design, and quality
of work (Novinger, 2001). Staff members demonstrated respectful and open body
language by maintaining eye contact, smiling, and facing students during interactions.
All participants wore casual, yet professional clothing, suggesting to students they were
competent and approachable. Personnel also displayed appropriate personal items in
office spaces; reinforcing the professional atmosphere, while providing conversation
pieces to engage students. Finally, a high work quality communicated competency and
professionalism.

Listening, the third communication component could not be directly observed.
Rather, the researcher had to assume the quality of listening based on staff behaviors and
student responses. According to communication research, listening should not be a
passive process. Rather, staff members should demonstrate active listening by
acknowledging the person was heard, paraphrasing content, or indicating an underlying
feeling is understood (Goulston, 2010). The researcher noted numerous examples of
paraphrased content, especially during financial aid exchanges. The staff member
listened to several complicated stories, summarized the information, and asked the
student if her interpretation was accurate. Students responded with nods and smiles,
suggesting they appreciated being understood. Several workers also reflected underlying
feelings expressed by students. Comments such as “that must be frustrating,” and “you
sound excited!” conveyed concern for the students and elicited positive responses.
Overall, participants demonstrated effective verbal, non-verbal, and listening skills.
Implications for Practice

Findings from this study are applicable to three community college stakeholders: administrators, front-line classified staff members, and students. The study provides administrators with an opportunity to better understand the perspective of front-line classified staff members. Classified staff members can use the information to increase their understanding of students and their role in the education process. Finally, although it is unlikely students will read this document, college personnel can communicate staff expectations to them. In each of these ways, the findings could improve the student experience, leading to increased student persistence, and ultimately, increased student success.

Administrators

The first step in enhancing classified staff interactions with students is to properly hire and assign front-line workers. Comments regarding attraction to the community college provided insight for hiring practices. All workers agreed helping students and the college atmosphere were two major job benefits. However, practical considerations, such as schedule flexibility and location, primarily attracted older workers. Younger staff members spoke more of enjoying the creativity involved in an academic atmosphere, the opportunity to gain knowledge, and their satisfaction with the autonomy the school offered them. College leaders might use this information when trying to attract younger workers to their institution. For example, job announcements might state the college is looking for “creative individuals” or “independent workers.” It might also emphasize any educational benefits associated with the position.
Findings also indicated front-line workers need to care about students. Participant comments and researcher observations confirmed the importance of staff members demonstrating empathy, interest, and understanding. The message was clear: students respond to staff members who care about them. Conversely, workers who do not care about students should not deal with students. This point also addresses concerns about multi-tasking and uneven distributions of labor among office staff. Properly placing student-focused staff members in front-line positions, and transferring administrative tasks to back office workers could be a win-win situation for both staff members and students.

Administrators can also use study information to keep personnel motivated once placed in a front-line position. Findings indicated employees experience stress from the monotony of answering repeated routine questions, the challenges associated with complicated student issues, and an overall high volume of work. Daily interactions with distressed, rude, and frustrated students also exact an emotional toll. Leaders should proactively address these issues and help employees identify stress-reducing strategies.

Data analysis also supported further use of existing procedures to reduce staff stress. For example, most offices report peak periods when a high volume of work often overwhelms staff and decreases the quality of their interactions with students. Currently, leaders manage these peak periods by temporarily reducing administrative work or reassigning workers from less active offices to the busier work places. The findings suggest these strategies should be continued and increased. Leaders must explore ways to permanently streamline all administrative office procedures. If requirements can be temporarily suspended, perhaps they can be permanently eliminated. Additionally, more
cross-training is needed to fully utilize all available staff throughout the year. These are not new ideas; however, participant input suggested more could be accomplished in these areas.

Staff members also need more collaboration to solve complex issues. Participants claimed they rarely had time to talk to other workers in their same position or to discuss issues with employees who regularly interface on routine matters. As a result, there appeared to be a lack of consistency across campuses, and a lack of procedural understanding within the same campus. Respondents believed they would solve many problems if they just had time to talk to other staff members about their concerns. However, they stressed nonchalant conversations and temporary problem solving were not sufficient solutions. Rather, workers needed dedicated time to meaningfully communicate with colleagues.

Leaders should schedule routine college-wide and campus-wide meetings for classified personnel to examine problem areas and identify practical solutions. Reduced service hours or creative staff rotations would be necessary to enable front-line workers to attend. However, the resulting increased efficiency would justify the time investment. The streamlined administrative processes would likely reduce student “run-around” and decrease staff workload for staff. Together, these benefits would increase the likelihood of more positive student experiences.

Findings also indicated considerable education and talent were being underutilized in the classified staff ranks. Two participants commented on the lack of appreciation for their skills and knowledge; another contributor expressed an interest in doing more. Leaders could draw upon staff academic and professional experience for
student mentoring, college consultations, and committee leadership roles. Of course, workers would have to receive adequate compensation or reassigned time. Full utilization of this wealth of talent could prove beneficial to the institution, the employees, and the students.

Finally, staff members claimed high levels of job satisfaction when directly asked for a rating. However, closer data analysis exposed underlying frustrations that should be addressed. One respondents mentioned there was “not enough appreciation,” while another noted she was “more listened to at a smaller organization.” Contributors were hesitant to ask for recognition, but the message was there. Budget constraints limit rewards and pay raises for good performance. Nevertheless, leaders should work to catch employees doing well and recognize their efforts.

**Classified Staff Members**

Insights from participants can prove useful to other support personnel. Data analysis revealed ten effective interpersonal skills from participant comments and behaviors. Front-line staff members should strive to be respectful, approachable, good communicators, patient, compassionate, sensitive, detail-oriented, knowledgeable, student-centered, and happy. It is difficult to teach staff members to be approachable, compassionate, sensitive, and happy; however, aspects of all identified skills can be learned. Increased awareness in these areas can improve interactions with supervisors, colleagues, and students.

Front-line staff members can also use these findings to reevaluate their own work. Participants explained their belief in the importance of greeting students, providing directions, motivating students, and serving as a human connection in an increasingly
technological world. These convictions could prove useful in maintaining a positive attitude. Participants also emphasized staff members must empower students, not enable them. That is, respondents explained they wanted to help students achieve their goals, but they did not want to do the work for them. All front-line staff training programs should incorporate these insights.

Students

College leaders can also use these findings to enhance how students interact with college staff. The researcher recommends including this information in student orientations. First and foremost, students should interact with staff members in a respectful and professional manner. Student deference shown to administrators and staff members must also be extended to classified staff members. Leaders should stress the importance of staff positions and clarify appropriate behavior. Students should also be aware of established office procedures. Proper preparation for administrative meetings can reduce frustrations for both student and staff members.

Recommendations for Future Research

The exploratory nature of this study provided abundant opportunities for future research directions. The study investigated the impact of front-line classified staff interactions on the student experience. This focus generated two key areas for future research: interactions and classified staff issues. Overall, new research directions regarding interactions must expand our understanding of how communication with community college students impacts their college experience. Future works on classified staff members must raise awareness of issues related to this under-studied group. Following are specific suggestions to increase knowledge in both areas.
Interactions

The current study was designed to specifically investigate front-line classified staff interactions with students from the classified staff perspective. Since communication is best understood by examining how both members of an interaction view the experience, future research is necessary to address the student perspective. Student focus group responses and a local survey (Customer Service Committee Report, 2008) from the targeted institution support this recommendation. Students struggled to provide examples of positive interactions with classified staff members; however, they recounted numerous dissatisfying exchanges. These reports conflicted with the generally positive view expressed by front-line staff members. A study of the student perspective could elucidate reasons for this discrepancy and provide staff members with specific information to improve their interactions with students.

Research on staff interactions with students must consider both perspectives as well as both behaviors. Findings from this study clarified front-line staff skills effective in dealing with students. Participants also offered their suggestions as to how students might enhance interactions. However, additional research is needed to objectively assess student behaviors when seeking assistance. This information could be incorporated into new student orientations to help students interact more effectively in the college environment.

Interactions also do not generally take place in a vacuum. Therefore, a case study that included multiple perspectives would provide a broader view of the interactions. Researchers might interview or survey administrators, supervisors, faculty, and back-office staff regarding classified staff interactions with students. These stakeholders have
an understanding of the institutional goal of student success; however, they do not have a personal investment in the interactions. They could provide an informed, but detached view of the exchanges. Parents and relevant community members (e.g. high school counselors) might also offer additional insights. They do not have an attachment to the institution; therefore, their comments would offer an outsider’s view. This research, together with the in-depth investigations of the staff and student perspectives, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of front-line interactions with students.

The comprehensive approach also supports considering interactions beyond front-line staff and students. Existing research recommends retention efforts should permeate an institution (Bailey, 2005; Davis, 2008; Fontana, et al., 2006; Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005). Therefore, the researcher suggests further investigation into all college personnel interactions with students. This includes administrators, faculty, maintenance personnel, and back office staff members. Student surveys could be used to assess current practices and provide direction for future study. However, a qualitative approach, including interviews and first-hand observations, is also needed to understand subtleties within each type of interaction.

Finally, this study specifically examined face-to-face interactions. Telephone communications and electronic correspondence are also part of the student experience. Therefore, community college leaders are urged to examine how all forms of institutional communication impact students. The latter focus is especially relevant in that students are receiving increasing amounts of information via websites and emails. Nevertheless,
participants in this study emphasized the need to maintain a human connection, especially with first-generation, international, and older students. Future researchers must consider the issue in planning their studies. Since the targeted population is students receiving electronic information, an electronic survey might be the most appropriate and efficient choice. However, the focus of the proposed research examines ways to gain electronic efficiency without losing the benefits of human interaction. Therefore, it might be best to collect data through methods involving personal contact, such as interviews or focus groups. The research dilemma reflects the targeted concern. Both research designs have merit and both have distinct disadvantages. Future researchers must find a way to maximize the benefits of electronic efficiency while still maintaining the advantages of human interactions.

Role of Classified Staff Members

The first protocol questions for the individual interviews and focus groups involved background information. The researcher asked participants to share their educational and professional experiences to establish rapport, gain trust, and develop a better understanding of their perspective. She uncovered diverse personal histories often unrelated to the current position. As detailed in the findings, participants had previous teaching, military, government, business, and Information Technology experience. National or local surveys of community college classified staff members could determine the depth of talent among all classified personnel. Survey results similar to these findings could reveal a pool of under-utilized and untapped talent at two-year institutions. Staff members with specific skills could then be used as program consultants or student mentors in their areas of expertise. Their non-academic knowledge could bring a new
dimension to classroom information, thereby broadening the student perspective and enhancing the college experience.

The demographic profile of current front-line classified staff members also merits attention. Participants at the targeted institution were primarily female, with the majority over forty years old. The researcher did not analyze the findings according to specific staff member characteristics; however, the similarities generated questions. What impact do gender and age have on student interactions? Would under-represented populations respond to a more diverse staff? Does a “nurturer” image harm or help students adjust to college? Do either of these characteristics matter if effective communication skills are employed? Answers to these questions could facilitate appropriate personnel selection and training, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive student experiences.

Additional research is also needed to address other aspects of the age question. Participants suggested the makeup of community college offices is changing, with many older workers about to reach retirement age. This reality introduces new questions to this research area. How do the older workers feel about being replaced? How do their feelings impact their work? How do the interactions between older workers and students differ from those between younger workers and students? What can younger workers learn from their more experienced colleagues? How can community colleges facilitate this transfer of information? These are all questions likely to affect the quality of future student experiences.

Although not specific to interactions, future researchers might also consider recording the historical community college knowledge of older classified staff members. Three participants for this study worked more than thirty years at the institution. Their
wealth of knowledge about the college, their jobs, and the students was unique. Although various works are available on the chronology of community colleges, the history of classified staff members is largely untold. A qualitative multiple case study of long-term workers could provide unexpected guidance for a new generation of workers.

Finally, this study elucidated the toll of emotional labor on classified staff members. Front-line workers are routinely subjected to rude, frustrated, demanding, and disappointed students. They are expected to respond to numerous repetitive questions with the same enthusiasm as unique and interesting requests. Workers deal with increasing workloads and decreasing space with few pay raises. Each of these realities exacts an emotional toll on personnel, and each is worthy of further investigation.

Work Environment

The findings revealed several work environment insights that merit additional consideration. First, participants reported varied student interactions based on the office they represented. For example, personnel in the provost office were treated with more respect than front-line workers at the business office. Research regarding the impact of staff position could elucidate new insights on staff to student interactions. Respondents also explained differences in student and staff demographics, leadership, and atmosphere among the three targeted campuses. Future researchers might consider the impact of campus makeup on staff attitude, interactions, and ultimately, student experiences.

Participants addressed two work place characteristics with direct impact on student interactions: multi-tasking and open work spaces. Staff members reported increased need for multi-tasking to handle burgeoning enrollments and staff shortages. At times, workers were asked to interact with students while completing detailed tasks,
such as semester schedules, budget reports, and adjunct files. Much of this work is performed in open work spaces with multiple distractions from phones, side conversations, and foot traffic. Research on the impact of multi-tasking and open spaces on the quality of student interactions and administrative work could provide insight into these increasingly common practices.

Finally, the researcher noticed individual participants were less likely to share negative comments as compared to focus group members. All respondents were initially hesitant to complain; however, as the interviews progressed, focus group members were more willing to express dissatisfaction with student behaviors, work conditions, policies, and procedures. The researcher also noted a pattern of negativity among student focus group members. It was unclear how these attitudes impacted student interactions. Further research is needed to first assess group influence on staff attitudes, and then examine how those attitudes affect interactions with students.

**Concluding Remarks**

This study explored the impact of classified staff interactions from the perspective of classified staff members. The researcher examined an aspect of community colleges that is seldom considered beyond the immediate exchange. She found rich and diverse experiences occurring on a routine basis throughout the campuses. Staff members engaged, encouraged, consoled, motivated, assisted, directed, instructed, and supported numerous students every day. Some interactions lasted a few seconds; others required weeks to come to final resolution. The results, for better or worse, added to the student experience. Undoubtedly, many of the interactions seemed inconsequential to the student. However, findings indicate many others made a definitive impact on the student.
experience. This qualitative study accomplished the desired goal: to explore staff interactions with students. The findings uncovered a strategy to enhance the student experience, and potentially increase the likelihood of student success. Further research is now needed to more fully understand the role of classified staff members in community colleges.
REFERENCES


doi: 10.2190/6R55-4B30-28XG-I8UO


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doi: 10.1177/009155218000800308


doi:10.1080/10668926.2011.525191


doi:10.1177/009155210503200405


APPENDIX A

REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT TARGETED INSTITUTION

To: Vice President, Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher

Subj: Request to Conduct Research

Dear Dr. ........:

Attached are several documents in support of my request for permission to conduct research at ........ (please see reference list and brief description below). Due to the length of the document, I am sending the actual proposal in a separate e-mail. The proposal contains the majority of information required by ...... Section ... of the Faculty Handbook. The methodology, including proposed correspondence and instruments meet all additional requirements outlined in Section ...... The proposal is thorough and lengthy. Please note that Chapter 3 summarizes the methodology and the appendices include all proposed instruments. If you prefer an abridged version, I will forward a copy of the power-point used for the proposal defense or an abridged version of the proposal. Any information not specifically included in the proposal is outlined and attached in a separate statement. If the wording of that statement is acceptable, I will send a signed hard copy with my original signature to your office.

The research will be used in partial fulfillment for requirements leading to a PhD in Community College Leadership at Old Dominion University. The dissertation proposal was successfully defended in front of my dissertation committee on November 15, 2010. The proposal was then reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Review
Board at Old Dominion University. With your approval, I will be able to collect data and move forward to complete my dissertation research.

The attached proposal is based on an earlier study that I conducted at …… campus during the Fall, 2009 semester. The findings from that study were presented at the CSCC conference in April and will be published in the Community College Journal of Research and Practice this March. I have discussed this research with Dr. ………, Associate Vice President of Student Services and Enrollment Management, and she has verbally supported my efforts. I certainly hope the findings will contribute to a more positive student experience at …… and at other community colleges.

Please let me know if you require any additional information. I look forward to your response. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt

Attachments:

Dissertation Proposal: (sent in a separate e-mail)

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Methodology

References

Appendices
As required by ..........of The Faculty Handbook:

1. Copy of research instruments (included in proposal appendices)

2. Credentials of the researchers
   - current resume
   - curriculum vitae of dissertation chair
   - IRB approval from ODU

3. Statement of how research will benefit .......... (included in chapter 1 of proposal under significance and relationship to community college leadership)

4. Description of project, recent literature, research methodology (included in proposal)

5. Statement of proposed time frame (as stated in IRB approval from ODU and included in attached statement)

6. Statement to provide .......... with written report of findings (attached)

7. Agreement to Protect Confidentiality of Individual Information (outlined in methodology chapter of proposal and included in attached statement)

8. Human Subjects Certification (attached)
APPENDIX B

REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT TARGETED CAMPUS

To: Provost …Campus

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher

Subj: Request to Conduct Research

Dear Dr. …………:

I am conducting a research study entitled: Exploring the Impact of Classified Staff Interactions on the Student Experience: A Multiple Case Study Approach. The study involves data collection at three ……..campuses, including the …………… campus. Dr. …… Vice President, Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at NOVA approved the research. This work is being conducted in partial fulfillment of requirements for my PhD in Community College Leadership at Old Dominion University. Thus, the study was also approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia.

Attached is a brief overview of the research, including the methodology. This design was successfully piloted at …….. during the fall semester, 2009. To begin the process, I would like to send the attached letter to all …………. front-line classified staff members. Any interested personnel could then contact me directly. Before collecting data, I will contact all relevant supervisors to assure minimal disruption to the workplace. If this is acceptable, please provide a point of contact that can assist me in accessing the appropriate e-mail distribution lists. I do not anticipate the need for any additional support.
Please be assured that I will strive to conduct the research in a thorough and professional manner with minimal disruption to any college activity. As stated in the attachment, I will also maintain strict confidentiality throughout the process. Finally, I will provide you with a summary of my findings at the conclusion of the study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns regarding this research. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX C

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN STUDY OF CLASSIFIED STAFF INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS

To: Classified Staff Member

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher

Subj: Request for Participation in Study of Classified Staff Interactions with Students

Dear Classified Staff Member,

Greetings! I am currently conducting a qualitative research study to explore the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. You are being asked to participate in this study based on your current position at the college. I am interested in learning more about how you view your job, especially in regards to your interactions with students. Your participation in the study will add to the understanding of the overall importance of your position. It will also help us to better understand how your work contributes to the student experience.

If you are willing to participate in this study, I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to further discuss the project. Participation is strictly voluntary and will not impact your current position. There is no payment for participation, nor is there any other type of direct compensation. If you agree to participate, I will also seek approval from your supervisor to collect data during normal work hours. However, your individual responses will not be shared with your supervisor or anyone else. I will keep all comments strictly confidential. I will report my findings as a combined total, with no individual characteristics included.

I am conducting this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Community College Leadership from Old Dominion University. Therefore, Old
Dominion University provides oversight for the research. The Darden College of Education's Human Subjects Research Committee at Old Dominion University approved this study. Additionally, The Vice President for Research, Planning, and Assessment at NOVA endorsed this work. A copy of both approvals is available by request.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at the above e-mail address or at my office phone... I appreciate your consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX D

FOLLOW-UP E-MAIL DECLINING OFFER TO PARTICIPATE

To: Interested Participant

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher

Subj: Participation in Study for Classified Staff Interactions with Students

Dear ........:

    Thank you very much for your interest in my study on classified staff interactions with students. Unfortunately, based on the information you provided, you do not meet the requirements for participation. For this research, I am only studying classified staff members with direct student contact. I certainly appreciate your interest, however. I will keep you in mind for future research.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann
APPENDIX E

FOLLOW-UP E-MAIL TO FAVORABLE REPLIES

To: Potential Participant
CC: Direct Supervisor

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher

Subj: Request for Participation in Study of Classified Staff Interactions with Students

Dear (insert name here),

Thank you very much for your interest in the research study on classified staff interactions with students. I look forward to meeting with you to further explain the project and your potential involvement in it. If you are available, I would like to come to your office at Insert Location, on Insert Day and Date, at Insert Time. Please let me know by Insert Deadline if this is convenient for you. If any part of the proposed meeting is not acceptable, please contact me with suggestions that would more conveniently meet your needs.

Again, I appreciate your willingness to get involved in this important study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at this e-mail address, or at my office phone… I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
<table>
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<td>8/25 at 8 am</td>
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<td>Interview</td>
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<td>Jones</td>
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<td>Mason</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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APPENDIX G

PARTICIPANT INTAKE FORM

Name:

________________________________________

Position:

________________________________________

Best Days/Times:

________________________________________

Worst/Impossible Days/Times:

________________________________________

Interview/Observation: ___________ Focus Group: ___________

NOTES:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________
APPENDIX H

INVITATION FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW AND OBSERVATION

PARTICIPANTS

To: Selected Participant

CC: Direct Supervisor

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher

Subj: Request for Individual Interviews and Observations

Dear (insert name here),

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me on insert meeting time here. As we discussed, the research design requires five participants to take part in individual interviews and work-place observations. If you are willing, I would be honored to have you as one of the five participants. After discussing the project with you, I believe you would be an ideal candidate to study the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience.

The study will consist of two interviews; one will take place before the work-place observations, and the second will take place after all observations are complete. Each interview will last approximately one hour and will cover questions specific to your job experience. We will meet at a neutral campus location, at a mutually convenient time, approved by your immediate supervisor. The interview will follow a semi-structured interview protocol. That is, I will have a prepared set of questions; however, I will have the flexibility to follow-up on your unique responses. To assure accuracy, I respectfully request your permission to tape the interview and to take notes during the process. During the interview, you may decline to answer any or all of the questions.
Your individual comments will not be shared with your supervisor or anyone else. I will keep all comments strictly confidential.

I also respectfully request the opportunity to observe you at your work place for one work day. The observation will also be conducted on a mutually convenient day and time and will be pre-approved by your supervisor. I will take all the necessary steps to minimize disruption to your regular routine. During the observation, I will be taking notes. I might ask you a few questions to clarify what I am seeing; but for the most part, I will be simply observing. Since the observation is part of the complete research protocol, it is important to participate in both parts of the process. However, you are welcome to cease participation in the study at any time.

As previously stated, your responses during the interview and your interactions during the observations will remain strictly confidential. After the data collection, you will be given an opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. I will keep all notes and recordings in a locked file cabinet that only I can access; voice recordings will be separated from written notes to avoid any possible comparison. I will report my findings as a combined total, with no individual characteristics included. I included these procedures in the research proposal and they have been approved by representatives from both Old Dominion University and this institution.

The research findings will appear in my dissertation. Personnel at Old Dominion University, the home campus of the researcher, will review the information. There is a possibility that I will submit a summary of this research for publication in a professional journal or present the findings at a professional conference. A copy of the final research manuscript and any subsequent work will be available upon request.
As discussed, the purpose of this research project is to explore the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. Participation is strictly voluntary and will not impact your current position. There is no payment for participation, nor is there any other type of compensation. Your willingness to participate in this study will enable us to better understand the important job you do each day. Increased understanding of individual job requirements and contributions could lead to enhanced work conditions or training opportunities; however, there is no promise of such benefits. You may list your participation as part of your annual review; however, there is no guarantee that this will impact your evaluation. You may also list your participation on your resume as part of community service activities.

Thank you for considering my invitation to participate in this project through individual interviews and observations. If you have any questions, you can contact me at the above e-mail address or at my office phone... I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
To: Selected Participant
CC: Direct Supervisor
From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher
Subj: Appointment Confirmation for Research Interview or Observation

Dear (insert name here),

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in the study of classified staff interactions with students. The data collection will begin with an individual interview. This will be followed by one work-site observations. The research will then conclude with a final interview. As discussed, we are scheduled to meet for type of session on Day, Date, and Time at Place. Please confirm your availability for this session. If your availability changes, please notify me as soon as possible. I am looking forward to learning about your experience with students.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX J

REQUEST FOR SUPERVISOR’S APPROVAL – INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS

To: Direct Supervisor
CC: Participant; Corresponding Dean
From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher
Subj: Request for Supervisor’s Approval

Dear (insert name here),

Greetings! I am currently conducting a qualitative research study to explore the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. One of your employees has voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Since it is necessary to conduct this research during work hours, I am requesting your approval of that participation. I assure you that I will conduct the research in a professional manner with minimal disruption to the routine of your office. Please note that this research is approved by the Office of Institutional Research. A copy of that approval is available by request.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the contributions of classified staff members to the student experience. It is well documented that a positive student experience correlates positively with student success. Ultimately, the goal is to identify how student interactions with front-line classified staff members might result in increased student success. To gather data on this important topic, I will need to observe your employee during one work day for approximately six hours. I also will conduct an interview before beginning any observations and after all observations are completed. No individual responses will be shared with you or any member of the institution. I will
report my findings as a combined total, with no individual characteristics included. A copy of the final manuscript will be available upon request.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at the above e-mail address or at my office phone … I appreciate your consideration of this request and I look forward to your favorable reply. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX K

CONFIRMATION FOR INTERVIEW OR OBSERVATION APPOINTMENT

To: Selected Participant

CC: Direct Supervisor

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher

Subj: Appointment Reminder for Research Interview or Observation

Dear (insert name here),

Greetings! This is a reminder that we are scheduled to meet **Day and Date**, at **Time**. We will meet at **Location**. I am looking forward to learning more about your job and your interactions with students. Please let me know if you are unable to keep this appointment. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
To: Selected Participant
CC: Direct Supervisor

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher

Subj: Appointment Reminder for Research Interview or Observation

Dear (insert name here),

Greetings! This is a reminder that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, [Day and Date], at [Time]. We will meet at [Location]. I am looking forward to learning more about your job and your interactions with students. Please let me know if you are unable to keep this appointment. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX M

INVITATION FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

To: Selected Participant
CC: Direct Supervisor
From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher
Subj: Invitation to participate in a Focus Group

Dear (insert name here),

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me on insert meeting time here. As we discussed, the research design requires the formation of a focus group to gather a variety of perspectives from classified staff members. If you are willing, I would be honored to have you as one of the focus group participants. After discussing the project with you, I believe you would be an ideal candidate to share your perspectives on the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience.

The focus group last approximately one and a half hours and will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place. The date and time will be determined based on the availability of all members. There will be approximately six to eight additional participants. The group will be asked a set group of questions. Some questions will be open to the entire group; other questions will be asked of each individual member. You are not required to answer each question. If you choose not to answer, you may simply keep quiet or state that you will pass. There will be no attempt to coax you to reply.

I will make every effort to maintain the confidentiality of all focus group responses. After the focus group, you will be given an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. I will keep all notes and recordings in a locked file cabinet that
only I can access. All data collected during this research project will be reported in group form only. No identifying information will be included in the report. The findings will be included in my dissertation. Personnel from Old Dominion University will review these findings. I might also choose to submit a summary of the research for publication in a professional journal or present the findings at a professional conference. A copy of the final research manuscript and any subsequent work will be available upon request.

The purpose of this research project is to explore your perspective of classified staff interactions on the student experience. Participation is strictly voluntary and will not impact your current position. There is no payment for participation, nor is there any other type of direct compensation. Your willingness to participate in this study will enable us to better understand the important job you do each day. Increased understanding of individual job requirements and contributions could lead to enhanced work conditions or training opportunities; however, there is no promise of such benefits. You may list your participation as part of your annual review; however, there is no guarantee that this will impact your evaluation. You may also list your participation on your resume as part of community service activities.

Please respond to this e-mail if you are willing to participate in this focus group. If you have any questions, you can contact me at the above e-mail address or at my office phone... Thank you for considering this important request. I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX N

REQUEST FOR SUPERVISOR'S APPROVAL – FOCUS GROUP

To: Direct Supervisor

CC: Participant; Corresponding Dean

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher

Subj: Request for Supervisor’s Approval

Dear (insert name here),

Greetings! I am currently conducting a qualitative research study to explore the impact of classified staff interactions on the student experience. One of your employees has voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Since it is necessary to conduct this research during work hours, I am requesting your approval of that participation. I assure you that I will conduct the research in a professional manner with minimal disruption to the routine of your office. Please note that this research is approved by the Office of Institutional Research. A copy of that approval is available by request.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the contributions of classified staff members to the student experience. It is well documented that a positive student experience correlates positively with student success. Ultimately, the goal is to identify how student interactions with front-line classified staff members might result in increased student success. To gather data on this important topic, I will need to participate in a focus group that will last approximately ninety minutes. No individual responses will be shared with you or any member of the institution. I will report my findings as a combined total, with no individual characteristics included. A copy of the final manuscript will be available upon request.
If you have any questions, you can contact me at the above e-mail address or at my office phone… I appreciate your consideration of this request and I look forward to your favorable reply. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX O

FOCUS GROUP APPOINTMENT CONFIRMATION

To: Selected Participant

CC: Direct Supervisor

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher

Subj: Appointment Confirmation for Focus Group

Dear (insert name here),

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in the study of classified staff interactions with students. Your participation as part of a focus group will enable me to better understand your position and how you interact with students. The focus group is scheduled for: **Day and Date** at **Time** at **Location**.

Please report to the session approximately ten minutes prior to the start time. The focus group will take approximately 90 minutes. If you need directions to the location, or if you have any other questions, please contact me at this e-mail or at my office phone: 703- ..............

Thank you again!

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
CONFIRMATION FOR FOCUS GROUP APPOINTMENT

To: Selected Participant

CC: Direct Supervisor

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher

Subj: Appointment Reminder for Focus Group Participation

Dear (insert name here),

Greetings! This is a reminder that you are scheduled to take part in a focus group on the experience of classified staff interactions with students on, Day and Date, at Time, at Location. I am looking forward to learning more about your job and your interactions with students. Please let me know if you are unable to keep this appointment. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX Q

FINAL CONFIRMATION FOR FOCUS GROUP APPOINTMENT

To: Selected Participant

CC: Direct Supervisor

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, M.A. Researcher

Subj: Appointment Reminder for Focus Group Participation

Dear (insert name here),

Greetings! This is a reminder that you are scheduled to take part in a focus group on the experience of classified staff interactions with students tomorrow, **Day and Date**, at **Time** at **Location**. I am looking forward to learning more about your job and your interactions with students. Please let me know if you are unable to keep this appointment. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Schmitt
APPENDIX R

RELEASE AGREEMENT FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS

Dear Research Participant:

You have been asked to participate in a research project that will explore the experience of classified staff members at a community college. The research will consist of interviews, observations, and a focus group. You are being asked to take part in an individual interview and an observation. The data collected from the research will be compiled and reported as group data only. No individual names will be used in the report. The final report will be reviewed by a staff member from Old Dominion University, the oversight agency for this research. Participation in the research process is strictly voluntary and there is no compensation for your time. Your participation will be used to help us better understand the impact of classified staff members on the student experience.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact Mary Ann Schmitt at .......... or at .......... Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely, Mary Ann Schmitt

I, _________________, hereby agree to voluntarily participate in a research study of classified staff at a community college. I understand that I will be asked verbal questions about my job experience during an individual interview and I will be observed at my work place. I also understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________________
APPENDIX S

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The researcher will meet with each participant prior to the interview and explain the purpose of the research and the interview process. The researcher will say:

"I am conducting a qualitative research study to better understand how administrative assistants and other classified staff contribute to the overall student experience. If you are willing to participate, I would like to ask a few questions about your job and your interactions with students. Your answers and any identifying information will be kept strictly confidential. I will not use your name in any discussion or in any writings related to the research. Only group data will be reported.

Do you have any questions?

If not, please read over this consent form and sign your name indicating your willingness to participate in the study.

Thank you. Now we can proceed with the interview."

1. Please begin by telling me your actual job title and then please tell me about your job.

   Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:
   - Tell me what you do each day.
   - What do you consider your main responsibilities at work?

2. Please tell me a little about your professional background, including your education and other work experiences.
Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

- How long have you worked here?
- Tell me about some of the other jobs you have held.
- Tell me what experiences prepared you to perform this job.

3. Please tell me how you decided to work at a community college.

Prompts to be used if the presenter is unsure how to answer:

- What made you apply for this position?
- Is this job what you expected? Please explain.

4. If someone asked you to explain what it is like working at this campus, what would you tell them?

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

- How would you describe the atmosphere in your office?
- How friendly is this campus?
- How easy is it to “fit in” at this campus?
- How helpful are your colleagues?

5. What do you like about your job?

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

- Work environment?
- Schedule?
- Salary?
- Duties?
- Colleagues?
6. **What don’t you like about your job?**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

- Work environment?
- Schedule?
- Salary?
- Duties?
- Colleagues?

7. **How satisfied are you with your job?**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

- How would you rate your job satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all satisfied and 10 being extremely satisfied?

8. **How confident are you with your ability to perform your daily duties?**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

- Are there parts of your job you are not sure how to perform?
- Are there areas in which you would like more training?
- Are there duties you hope you will not have to perform during the day?

9. **Tell me about a time when you really thought you helped a student.**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

- Tell me about a time you answered a difficult question
- Tell me about a time you went out of your way for a student
- Tell me about a time a student said thank you
10. Tell me about a time when you thought a student did not appreciate your help.

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

➤ Tell me about a time a student ignored your direction
➤ Tell me about a time a student was rude

11. Tell me about the most memorable student you can remember (no names, please)

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

➤ What student had the most compelling story?
➤ What student tried the hardest?
➤ What student was the most unusual?

12. What part did you play in that story?

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

➤ How much did you interact with the student?
➤ What type of interactions did you have with the student?

13. How would you describe the students you see each day?

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

➤ What characteristics seem most common among students?
➤ What seems to interest most students?
➤ What habits do you notice in students?

14. What do you expect of students?

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

➤ Respect?
> Asking the right questions?
> Being prepared?
> Bringing the right documents?

15. **What annoys you most about students?**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

> Disrespect?
> Lack of preparation?
> Sense of entitlement?

16. **How has the student population changed since you began working here?**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

> What do you notice different about students this semester?
> What seems to stay the same year after year?

17. **What do you think are the biggest challenges for the students with whom you interact?**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

> Financial problems
> Lack of college preparation
> Work schedules
> Motivation

18. **What impact do you think you have on the student experience?**

Prompts to be used if the interviewee is unsure how to answer:

> How important do you think your work is to a student?
How much do you think students appreciate your work?

19. Please tell me anything else you would like to add about your interactions with students.

That is all the questions I have for now. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you very much for your time and willingness to take part in this interview. I am looking forward to spending some time observing you at your work place.
APPENDIX T

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

The researcher will meet with each participant prior to the interview and explain the purpose of the research and the interview process. The researcher will say:

“I am conducting a qualitative research study to better understand how administrative assistants and other classified staff contribute to the overall student experience. If you are willing to participate, I would like to ask a few questions about your interactions with front-line classified staff members. I am identifying front-line classified staff members as those individuals who greet you in the various offices or who work with you on various administrative requirements at the college. This group does not include the counselors, department heads, the faculty, the deans, or the provost.

I will keep your answers and any identifying information strictly confidential. I will not use your name in any discussion or in any writings related to the research. The group data will be used to inform the development of the research protocols. I respectfully request that each of you keep the responses confidential, also. Please note, however, that since this is a group discussion, I cannot guarantee that each member will maintain confidentiality.

Before we begin, please remember to speak one at a time. Also, please be respectful when someone else is talking. There is no particular order to your responses, but I would appreciate it if you would each speak one at a time. For some questions, I might call on an individual to respond, or I might begin a round robin of responses around the room. You are never required to reply. You may simply say pass to decline to respond.

Please feel free to share your honest ideas, opinions, or experiences about your experiences. Do you have any questions? If not, please read over this consent form and
sign your name indicating your willingness to participate in the study. Thank you. Let's begin.....

1. As noted in the introduction, I am defining front-line classified staff members as personnel who greet you in the various offices or who work with you on various administrative requirements at the college. For example, the individuals who sit at the front desk of the testing center, library, counseling center; those who work in enrollment services or financial aid; or, the administrative assistants who work in the deans offices. Based on that description, approximately how many times each week do you interact with a member of the front-line classified staff?

   Prompts to be used if the participant is unsure how to answer:
   - More than five times per week? Ten?
   - At least once every week?

2. Please tell me about the best experience you had interacting with a front-line classified staff member.

   Prompts to be used if the participant is unsure how to answer:
   - A time when someone really helped you.
   - A time when someone was particularly friendly to you.

3. Specifically, what made that experience positive for you?

   Prompts to be used if the participant is unsure how to answer:
   - Did the interaction help you achieve a specific goal?
   - Did the interaction help you change your mood?
4. Please tell me about the worst experience you had interacting with a front-line classified staff member.

   Prompts to be used if the participant is unsure how to answer:
   
   ➢ A time when you did not receive the help you needed.
   
   ➢ A time when someone treated you in a rude manner.

5. Specifically, what made the experience negative for you?

   Prompts to be used if the participant is unsure how to answer:
   
   ➢ Did the interaction keep you from achieving a specific goal?
   
   ➢ Did the interaction change your mood?

6. What suggestions would you have to improve classified staff interactions with students?

   Prompts to be used if the participant is unsure how to answer:
   
   ➢ What would you like staff members to do when you approach with a question?
   
   ➢ What keeps you from approaching a staff member with a question?

That is all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me?

Please remember that all of the things we discussed today are to remain in this room. I will keep your responses confidential and only use your responses to inform my protocols.

Thank you very much for your time and willingness to take part in this focus group.
REQUEST FOR FINAL INTERVIEW AND ACCURACY CHECK

To: Interviewee

From: Mary Ann Schmitt, Researcher

Subject: Transcript of Interview on Classified Staff Interactions

Dear ........:

Hello again! I hope this note finds you well and enjoying the warm weather. I have been busy this summer working on my dissertation. Although some of the progress is slow, it is steady. At this point, I am analyzing the data and preparing to summarize the findings. To assure accuracy, I am attaching a full transcription of your interview. It has not been corrected for grammar and sentence structure. All words, utterances, and half-thoughts are included. Although this makes for a challenging read, please consider reviewing it. I want to be sure your thoughts are adequately represented.

As discussed at our last meeting, I would like to meet with you one last time for an exit interview. This purpose of this brief meeting is two-fold: to clarify any questions I have and to give you the opportunity to offer any final thoughts on the subject of classified staff interactions with students. You are also welcome to share any comments you have regarding the transcript at that time. Please let me know your availability for a final meeting. I look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann
APPENDIX V

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL AND CHECKLIST

At the beginning of the observation, the researcher will introduce herself and explain the purpose of the project. The evaluator will say: “Hello, my name is Mary Ann Schmitt and I would like to learn more about your job and how you interact with students. I am conducting this research as part of my requirements to earn a PhD in Community College Leadership. I want to learn as much as I can about your daily routine. I will be sitting here in your office and taking some notes. I will NOT be writing any names down, and all the information I collect will be kept confidential. The information I gather will be used to improve the interactions between classified staff members and our students. I am very happy to have this opportunity, and I thank you for letting me join you today.”

The researcher will then use the following observation checklist to record observations. Any unexpected behaviors or activities that are not included on the checklist should be noted under the space provided for additional comments.
OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Section 1: Sketch of Room

Note position of researcher in room. Note any movement by researcher or participant during the observation. Note position of other individuals in the room.

Notes:
Section 2: Environment

Check either Yes or No to each question. Note descriptive comments in the last column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office Environment</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>Descriptive Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the office easy to find?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the space neat and organized?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there adequate lighting?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the temperature comfortable?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the area busy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the area clean and well-maintained (i.e. fresh paint on walls, serviceable furniture)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a place for students to wait?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there current reading material available while waiting?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there artwork on the walls?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the staff easily accessed by visitors?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is staff member professionally dressed?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES
Section 2: Staff Member Interactions with Students

Describe the following characteristics for each staff to student interaction. Be sure to note any changes that occur for each characteristic during the interaction (e.g. tone of voice, eye contact). Note any thoughts or reflections that occur while observing the interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approximate age of student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity of student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Command of English language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of question asked (general information, common concern, individual problem)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of wait before being served</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation of student (i.e. knows what to ask; brings appropriate forms)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation of student (i.e. knows what to ask; brings appropriate forms)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice of student (i.e. angry, frustrated, hesitant)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye contact between student and staff member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smile from student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smile from staff member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting of staff member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice of staff member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary of staff member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate time taken with interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distractions or interruptions during interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of staff member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability of staff member to assist or resolve issue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES:**


APPENDIX W

RELEASE AGREEMENT FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Dear Research Participant:

You have been asked to participate in a research project that will explore the experience of classified staff members at a community college. The research will consist of interviews, observations, and a focus group. You are being asked to take part in the focus group. The data collected from the research will be compiled and reported as group data only. No individual names will be used in the report. The final report will be reviewed by a staff member from Old Dominion University, the oversight agency for this research. Participation in the research process is strictly voluntary, and there is no compensation for your time. Your participation will be used to help us better understand the impact of classified staff members on the student experience.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact Mary Ann Schmitt at mschmitt@...edu or at 703-............ Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely, Mary Ann Schmitt

I, ________________, hereby agree to voluntarily participate in a research study of classified staff at a community college. I understand that I will be a participant in a focus group. I understand that all information will be held confidential and that I will be expected to keep the responses of the group confidential. I also understand that I can withdraw from participation in this study at any time.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX X

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Hello. As I think you all know, my name is Mary Ann Schmitt. First of all, I want to thank each of you for being willing to participate in this group. I am conducting this focus group to better understand your perspectives regarding your job and the impact you have on the student experience. I hope the information you provide will help us improve both your jobs and the student experience.

I am going to ask a set of prepared questions and record the group responses in order to assure that I do not miss anything. I will also be taking notes on what you say, but I will not be keeping track of who says what. You will not be identified in any part of the final report. I will keep all of your responses completely confidential.

Before we begin, please remember to speak one at a time. Also, please be respectful when someone else is talking. There is no particular order to your responses, but I would appreciate it if you would each speak one at a time. For some questions, I might call on an individual to respond, or I might begin a round robin of responses around the room. You are never required to reply. You may simply say pass to decline to respond.

Please feel free to share your honest ideas, opinions, or experiences about your job. Do you have any questions? Then, let’s begin!

1. Let’s start with a round robin to introduce each other. You are welcome to use your own name or a pseudonym that you choose to use for this group. Again, I will do everything I can to maintain the confidentiality of this group and I ask each of you to do the same. I am interested in your responses. The name you choose will
not impact the results of this study. I will begin and then we can move in a circle to my right.

Please state your name, where you work, and how long you have worked at this campus.

Prompts may be used to remind each participant of the three parts of the question.

2. What do you consider your main responsibilities at work?

Prompts, if no response:

➢ What percentage of your job is paperwork?
➢ What percentage of your job involves faculty?
➢ What percentage of your job involves students?
➢ What other jobs do you do?

3. I realize that each day is different, but on an average day, how many interactions do you have with students?

Prompts, if no response:

➢ How often do you interact with students?
➢ Once per day?
➢ 20 times per day?
➢ 50?

4. Please tell me how you decided to work at a community college.

Prompts, if no response:

➢ What made you apply for this position?
➢ Is your job what you expected? Please explain.

5. What do you like about your job?
Prompts, if no response:

- Work environment?
- Schedule?
- Salary?
- Duties?
- Colleagues?

6. If you had the power to change a part of your job, what would you change?

Why?

Prompts, if no response:

- Work environment?
- Schedule?
- Salary?
- Duties?
- Colleagues?
- Other?

7. Tell me about a time when you really thought you helped a student.

Prompts, if no response:

- Tell me about a time you answered a difficult question
- Tell me about a time you went out of your way for a student
- Tell me about a time a student said thank you

8. Tell me about a time when you thought a student did not appreciate your help.

Prompts, if no response:

- Tell me about a time a student ignored your direction
9. Tell me about the most memorable student you can remember (no names, please). What part did you play in this student’s experience?

Prompts, if no response:
- What student had the most compelling story?
- What student tried the hardest?
- What student was the most unusual?
- How much did you interact with the student?
- What type of interactions did you have with the student?

10. How would you describe the current student population?

Prompts if no response:
- What similarities do you see among students
- How would you describe the major groupings of students
- What habits are common among students?

11. How have students changed since you began working here?

Prompts if no response:
- What do you notice different about students this semester?
- What seems to stay the same year after year?

12. What do you think are the biggest challenges for the students with whom you interact?

Prompts if no response:
- Financial problems
- Lack of college preparation
- Work schedules
- Motivation
13. What other things can you tell me about your interactions with students?

That is all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you very much for your time and willingness to take part in this focus group.

Please remember that all of the things we discussed in this room are to remain in this room. I will keep your responses confidential and only report my findings in group form.
APPENDIX Y

RELEASE FORM FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Dear Research Participant:

A research study involving front-line support staff members is currently being conducted on this campus. As part of the study, front-line support staff members are being observed interacting with students. The support staff member that you are about to interact with has agreed to be part of this study. Your permission to observe this interaction is also requested. The data collected from the research will be compiled and reported as group data only. No individual names will be used in the report. The final report will be reviewed by a staff member from Old Dominion University, the oversight agency for this research. Participation in the research process is strictly voluntary, and there is no compensation for your time. Your participation will be used to help us better understand the impact of classified staff members on the student experience.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at ........ or at ........ Thank you for your consideration of this request. Sincerely, Mary Ann Schmitt

I, ________________, hereby agree to voluntarily participate in a research study of classified staff at a community college. I understand that my participation will be limited to my interaction with a specified support staff member. I understand that all information will be held confidential. I also understand that I am not obligated to participate in this study and that I can withdraw from participation at any time.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________
VITA

MARY ANN SCHMITT

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Darden College of Leadership Room 210
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EDUCATION
Ph. D., Community College Leadership, Old Dominion University, in progress.

EXPERIENCE
Northern Virginia Community College, Manassas, VA:
• Assistant Professor, Psychology, 2002-present
• Site Manager, Manassas Innovation Park, 2008-2010
• Interim Dean, Communications Technology and Social Sciences, Summer, 2009
Charles County Community College, LaPlata, MD:
• Adjunct Instructor, Psychology, 1997-1998
Coastal Carolina Community College, Jacksonville, NC:
• Adjunct Instructor, Psychology, 1990-1991 and 1996-1997

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS
interactions on student retention: A multiple case study approach. Community
interactions on student retention: A multiple case study approach. Council for the
Study of Community Colleges Conference. Seattle, WA
classified staff interactions on student retention: A multiple case study approach.
Virginia Community College System New Horizons Conference. Roanoke, VA
classified staff interactions on student retention: A multiple case study approach.
Virginia Community College Association Conference. Williamsburg, VA

SERVICE
Northern Virginia Community College Manassas Campus Council Chair, 2010-2011
Northern Virginia Community College QEP Development Committee, 2010-present
Northern Virginia Community College CARE Team Member, 2009-present